

Special Issue Reprint

Mysticism Reloaded

Innovative Approaches, Methods, and Theories to
Study Mysticism

Edited by
Ali Qadir

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Mysticism Reloaded: Innovative Approaches, Methods, and Theories to Study Mysticism

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Contents

About the Editor	vii
Ali Qadir	
Editorial: Mysticism Reloaded	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 1311, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16101311	1
Arjun Nair	
Rethinking the <i>Unio Mystica</i> : From McGinn to Ibn ‘Arabī	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 94, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010094	7
Ali Qadir and Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir	
De-Mystifying Mysticism: A Critical Realist Perspective on Ambivalences in the Study of Mysticism	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 10, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010010	34
Rodrigo César Castro Lima	
Wittgenstein’s Mysticism(s)	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2024 , 15, 1460, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121460	58
Liz MacWhirter	
Wounds and One-Ing: How a “Creative–Critical” Methodology Formed Fresh Insights in the Study of Julian of Norwich, Voicing Her Christian Mysticism Today	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 384, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030384	79
Piero Latino	
Literature and Mysticism in the Wake of Silvano Panunzio: From <i>The Divine Comedy</i> to the European Literature of the Twentieth Century	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2024 , 15, 1278, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101278	90
Sebeesh Jacob	
A Gladdening Vision of a Dancing Christ: Findings of a Ritual Ethnography of Intercultural Icons	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2024 , 15, 1310, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111310	109
Jenny Anne Miller	
Merton’s Unity of Action and Contemplation in Transpersonal Perspective	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 147, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020147	123
Rossano Cesare Zas Friz De Col	
Mystical Experience and Decision Making	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 296, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030296	146
David H. Nikkel	
William James: The Mystical Experimentation of a Sick Soul	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2024 , 15, 961, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080961	162
Diego Pérez Lasserre	
Mysticism and Practical Rationality Exploring Evelyn Underhill through the Lens of Phronesis	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2024 , 15, 197, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020197	181
Peter Mark Tyler	
A Mystical Therapy: Re-Bootting the Mystical	
Reprinted from: <i>Religions</i> 2025 , 16, 1285, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16101285	195

About the Editor

Ali Qadir

Ali Qadir is Professor of Sociology at Tampere University, Finland. Dr. Qadir has an abiding interest in the study of religion, particularly mysticism, spirituality, heresy, religion and globalization, as well as the critical realist understanding of religious behavior. From 2025–2029, he is Director of the Program in the Study of Mysticism, a major initiative to catalyze the study of mysticism supported by Templeton Religion Trust. He also leads a research project on Mystics in Society (2025–2028) supported by Kone Foundation and has been awarded numerous other research grants and fellowships. Among other books, he co-authored a monograph on *Symbols and Myth-Making in Modernity: Deep Culture in Art and Action* (Anthem Press, 2023). He has also published extensively in scientific journals and books, besides presenting papers at over 50 international conferences. Dr. Qadir also teaches courses and supervises theses on and around these topics in Tampere University.

Editorial: Mysticism Reloaded

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Studies of mysticism have been in a state of turmoil for years. As Leigh Schmidt (2003) noted, “There is hardly a more beleaguered category than ‘mysticism’ in the current academic study of religion. Its fall from theoretical grace has been precipitous”. Much of this trend stems from critical scholarship on religion, which has pointed out the dangers in comparing or generalizing mysticism (and constituent terms like “experience” or “union”) as a cover-all term when it may, in fact, speak to different aspects of spiritual and lived realities in different contexts. Such critiques of the category of “mysticism” have proven an invaluable corrective to naïve essentialization, helping contextualize how the term has been used and what work it does in different settings and religious traditions. However, many researchers are finding that this added sensitivity does not require abandoning the term altogether. Indeed, if we are to take empirical evidence seriously, we must account for the self-evident similarity and spread of practices and phenomena that may be loosely grouped under the family-resemblance term of “mysticism.” In other words, it is not necessary for all instances of “mysticism” (much like “religion” or a similar category) to display the same, invariant characteristics. Instead, somewhat similarly to mathematical fuzzy sets or biological classifications, we can identify an instance as belonging to a category when it displays enough of a set of features, even if two features do not overlap. Following this Wittgensteinian approach of family resemblances allows for a post-critique, nuanced recovery of mysticisms. Indeed, this is precisely what appears to be underway in multiple disciplines and settings at present.

This Special Issue developed from this impulse to move past naively uncritical accounts, on the one hand, and pure criticism of the category, on the other, to probe new approaches, methods, and theories to study mysticisms. This Special Issue invited theoretical, methodological, and empirical research papers from any disciplinary perspective to shed new light on how to study mysticism in any religious or non-religious context. Particular attention was paid to the comparative or general study of mysticism and related empirical research in the social sciences, focusing on theory-building. The focus was also on the contemporary and categorial, although entries could, of course, be historically grounded. All contributions were double-blind peer-reviewed following the editorial policies of *Religions*.

Contributions were not required to fit into a pre-given theoretical framework, beyond presenting an openness to exploring the general or comparative utility of the category of mysticism. Still, there are some commonalities in perspective in the final selection of papers included in this Special Issue, which can be loosely grouped under the meta-theoretic framing of Critical Realism. To begin with, there is an inherent comfort with somewhat fuzzy definitions, as above. All the papers in this volume are more concerned with explaining empirical realities and self-evident similarities than with tearing down categories. In other words, if the category of mysticism is held with light hands, it might prove useful to compare empirical realities around the world and across history. In this sense, it is not

necessary to claim that the category is imposed on, say, non-Western or non-Christian contexts; on the contrary, denying these contexts a form of mystical tradition is as violent as assuming similarities. Instead, a more nuanced, empirically grounded recovery is needed to find resemblances that explain practices rather than essences to prove a category. This polythetic approach is Critical Realist in the sense that it gives primacy to ontology over epistemology. On the other hand, the studies in this volume all stay away from the trap of universalization. That is, even if mystics lay claim to a direct and encompassing singular knowledge, our access to what they say and how they practice is colored by context, tradition, language, training, and so on. None of the papers here claims universal access to unmediated mystical knowledge; rather, they seek to extend empirical and definitional findings to a tentative understanding of what mysticism might mean in different settings. Philosophical, literary, anthropological, and psychological papers all approach this category in different ways, with their own disciplinary rigor. Such epistemological relativism is also a feature of Critical Realism.

The papers also build on the understandability of the mystical phenomenon. This feature might be taken for granted in scientific writing, but when it comes to the mystical, ineffability is key. Indeed, how do we talk about nothing, or about the unsayable cosmic reality of mystics? This barrier of ineffability has led many positivists to argue that there is nothing useful to be gained by talk of nothingness. Yet, the popularity of mysticism and of mystical writings, not to mention the vast scholarship on varieties of mysticism, belie that claim. In a Critical Realist fashion, all the papers in this Special Issue assume that not only are the mystical texts, individuals, or practices they study legible, but they can be analyzed and presented to us. They assume, if it may be put that way, a *mysticality*, a sense by which we can grasp something of what mystics are saying, even though those experiences might be ineffable and the accounts may be paradoxical. In other words, the papers all rely on a sort of ground sense that we readers have an approximate or light grasp of what mystics say and do, even if we do not (or cannot) have immediate access to those experiences, and we must approach those accounts somewhat tangentially or metaphorically.

While the papers in this Special Issue can be read in this light to different degrees, most of them do not develop this meta-framing directly but rather present their analyses from their own disciplinary perspectives, which make the papers valuable and usable in themselves. They are available as individual articles—open-access and freely downloadable—making strong contributions to their own disciplinary fields. However, taken together as a volume they offer something more than the sum of the parts: a post-critique reboot of the category of mysticism. Although not solicited as such, and not organized in this way in the Special Issue list, the eleven papers in this volume can be read in three well-integrated sections that re-approach the mystical, explore the creative aspects so central to all mystical accounts, and discuss how to understand mysticism from the perspective of practical rationality.

The first section in this Special Issue, **Re-approaching the Mystical**, contains methodological papers. In “Rethinking the Unio Mystica: From McGinn to Ibn ‘Arabī”, Arjun Nair questions a category central to mysticism. Nair’s solution is to reach deep into tradition-specific vocabularies, which are profuse and often difficult to represent in interlinguistic contexts without significant explanation. His approach offers a new, post-critique promise of dialog among specialists of various mystical traditions—particularly non-western and non-Christian traditions—from within the conceptual and theoretical horizons of the traditions they research. Accordingly, Nair offers a (re)formulation of unio mystica from within the frame of the 12th/13th-century Sufi mystic, Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) and early members of his school of thought. By unpacking the primary terms involved in such an account—“God”, the “human being/self”, and “union—from within the conceptual and

theoretical horizons of that tradition, he problematizes the prevailing understanding of unio mystica constructed from the writings of specialists in Christian mysticism. Far from curtailing dialogue across traditions, Nair shows the payoff of such an archeology when each tradition operates from its own milieu, developing its own theoretical resources for mysticism.

Ali Qadir and Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir offer an analytical literature review in “De-Mystifying Mysticism: A Critical Realist Perspective on Ambivalences in the Study of Mysticism”. This paper, hewing closest to the Critical Realist perspective outlined above, reviews key 20th century developments in the Anglophone study of mysticism to understand why the term was largely abandoned and unpack the contours of this impasse. Asking how mysticism has been defined and who counts as a mystic, this multidisciplinary review is analytical rather than comprehensive. Each question is answered by studies along an axis, wavering between or combining elements of two ideal-typical poles. On the first question, scholarship ranges along an axis between poles of a reified vs. relativized substance of mysticism. On the second question, studies are situated on an axis between a rarified concept of mystical elites and a laified concept of mystical knowledge open to all. These axes yield a definitional space of mysticism that allows for a post-critique, general study of mysticism. The paper also locates “experience” at the origin point or intersection of both axes.

The paper on “Wittgenstein’s Mysticism(s)” by Rodrigo César Castro Lima rounds off this section by arguing that mysticism plays a bigger role in Wittgenstein’s writings than is generally recognized. Lima makes the case that the Tractarian mystical spirit still animates other works by the author, such as his Lectures on Ethics and the Philosophical Investigations. He goes on to propose that the unity of this mysticism lies in the sui generis discovery (or shock) that the world exists; however, as his work progresses, Wittgenstein employs different strategies to convey this message—and these vary from attempts to put this perspective into words to the full annihilation of the mere possibility of achieving this. Hence, there is one fundamental underlying type of mysticism in Wittgenstein’s proposals, but the unveiling of such a mystical insight demands different forms of exposition and understanding.

The next section of this Special Issue unpacks the **Creative Aspects of Mysticism**. Given the strong claim of ineffability, mystics have often resorted to metaphorical speech or art, often situated in ritualistic contexts. The section begins with a study by Liz MacWhirter on “Wounds and One-Ing: How a “Creative-Critical” Methodology Formed Fresh Insights in the Study of Julian of Norwich, Voicing Her Christian Mysticism Today”. MacWhirter’s paper is situated in post-theoretical “creative-critical” research that recently emerged in the discipline of Creative Writing, following a collapse of the binaries between practice and theory. Her paper illustrates the efficacy of this interdisciplinary methodology with a case study of the reflexive writing of the medieval Christian mystic Julian of Norwich. She explores the junctures at which Julian’s poetics intersect with trauma-informed theology for the holding and processing of loss and grief through Julian’s nuanced modeling of a mystical union with God. She applies this framework to contemporary ecological grief in the writing of a performative long poem, “Blue: a lament for the sea”. The “theopoetic” process of creation, using two images from Julian’s texts—Christ’s “wounds” and “one-ing”—develops a new language for the liminal and spiritual experience of the whole self.

Focusing on the history of literature, the next paper is “Literature and Mysticism in the Wake of Silvano Panunzio: From the Divine Comedy to the European Literature of the Twentieth Century” by Piero Latino. This paper introduces a forgotten figure of religious and literary studies: the Italian scholar, philosopher, metaphysician, poet, and

writer Silvano Panunzio (1918–2010), in whose work mysticism plays a pivotal role. Panunzio believed that the mystical dimension is fundamental to fully understanding the social, cultural, historical, and political events of humanity. He also assigned great importance to literature's relationship with mysticism, as in the case of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the works of other European and Eastern writers and poets. Significantly, Panunzio saved from oblivion the work of a forgotten man of letters, Gabriele Rossetti (1783–1854), who proposed the first symbolic and esoteric interpretation of Dante's literary production and of European medieval love literature. Raising awareness of the intellectual amnesia surrounding the figure of Silvano Panunzio is thus a useful contribution to future research in the field of mystical studies as well as literary studies.

The next paper in this section is Sebeesh Jacob's "A Gladdening Vision of a Dancing Christ: Findings of a Ritual Ethnography of Intercultural Icons". This study examines Christian artist Joy Elamkunnappuzha's use of Indian classical and mythical elements in his religious artworks in two North Indian churches. These intercultural icons, which incorporate symbols from Hindu traditions like mandalas and mudras, have been central to the worship practices of local Catholic communities for over three decades. Through ritual ethnography, the study reveals how these visual representations mediate ritual affectivity and communal imagination, impacting identity formation and spiritual engagement in a multi-religious context. Respondents—including worshippers, ministers, and religious students—attest to the transformative impact of these images, as they negotiate between Christian metaphors and Hindu aesthetic traditions. By exploring the creative dynamics of visual approach, visual appeal, and visual affinity within worship spaces, Jacob elucidates complex processes of meaning-making through symbolic mediation in interreligious mystical environments.

Finally, this section contains the paper on "Merton's Unity of Action and Contemplation in Transpersonal Perspective" by Jenny Anne Miller. Adopting a transdisciplinary approach, with specific emphasis on post-Jungian transpersonal psychological theories, this paper introduces a transpersonal psychological thread of understanding 'Mystical Consciousness' through a comparative religious approach to action, contemplation, and non-action. Miller draws on Thomas Merton's interreligious thinking on three major religious mystical traditions—Buddhism, Hinduism and mystical Islam/Sufism—elucidating comparative insights with the Christian tradition. The reader is invited to consider how Merton may have responded or written about interreligious, contemplative, in-depth mysticism in terms of his own writings on 'pure consciousness' had he the benefit of the language of transpersonal models of consciousness. The paper concludes by proposing the ancient sculpture of the Sleeping Hermaphrodite as an art-theological, symbolic analogy for the inner repose of an illumined soul for whom action is a manifestation of contemplation.

The final section in this Special Issue explores **Practical Rationality in Mysticism**. Starting from a philosophical account of practical reasoning, Rossano Cesare Zas Friz De Col's paper discusses "Mystical Experience and Decision Making". This paper explores the decision-making process in a new field: that of mystical lived experience, i.e., the perception of something present that is unknown, or the perception of mystery, within the decision-making process. This emphasizes that every perception requires a response that is more or less conscious, and the mystical lived experience is no exception. The goal is to enhance our understanding and interpretation of the dynamics of mystical experience using a phenomenological analysis of the decision-making process as a hermeneutic key. The philosophical and anthropological background of this study is Karl Rahner's transcendental experience, while the phenomenological and psychological perspective is informed by Louis Roy's experiences of transcendence and Juan Martin Velasco's studies on mysticism. The article first presents the theoretical foundations of this new approach

and applies them to the significant decisions made by St. Ignatius of Loyola, as detailed in his autobiography.

In a similar phenomenological vein, David H. Nikkel's paper is entitled "William James: The Mystical Experimentation of a Sick Soul". In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James developed the polar categories of healthy-minded individuals, content with their once-born religion, versus sick souls who need to become twice-born to find religious peace. Biographers of James have concluded that he does not fit well under either of his polar categories. Drawing on both data about James' life and on his philosophical and theological writings, Nikkel demurs from the biographers' conclusion and instead advances the thesis that the overall pattern of James' life is best understood as a sick soul searching for—and ultimately finding—twice-born religion in connection with mystical experiences. Notably, James attempted to theorize that mystical experiences were means of connecting with divine reality/ies in naturalistic ways compatible with scientific knowledge of his time. Current scientific knowledge makes it more difficult to find evidence of direct divine input in religious experiences, yet Nikkel proposes that there is value in religious experiences in terms of James' pragmatic criterion for truth: beneficial or adaptive effects.

Diego Pérez Lasserre's paper re-examines another 20th century classic in "Mysticism and Practical Rationality Exploring Evelyn Underhill through the Lens of Phronesis". This paper argues that mysticism can be considered rational from the perspective of Aristotelian practical reason. Lasserre argues that mysticism is an instance of the oxymoron inherent in practical wisdom (phronesis), namely, an ordered openness. Approached in a scientific manner, following Kantian rationality, of course mysticism cannot be deemed rational. The modern scientific approach to rationality also proves insufficient, since it is effective in fields where the subject matter typically unfolds in a regular or predictable manner. The paper makes the case, following Aristotle and Gadamer, that such theoretical reason should be complemented by practical reason, which is characterized by normative openness, to apprehend mysticism, which is indeed rational from a practical standpoint. Evelyn Underhill's classic work is taken as a case study of practical rationality.

Rounding off this section and the volume is Peter Tyler's paper on "A Mystical Therapy: Re-booting the Mystical". Tyler, a practicing psychotherapist, connects three strands of thought and practice to propose a 'mystical therapy'. First, there is the Christian mystical tradition as exemplified by the medieval tradition of *theologia mystica*. Secondly, there are the practices and insights of present-day therapy and counseling arising from the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and his successors, including recent approaches from practitioners such as James Hillman and Wilfred Bion. Finally, there are the philosophical reflections of Freud's Viennese contemporary Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), especially in regard to *das Mystische* and the choreography of saying and showing. All three strands are blended together as the author reflects on three decades of work in this area and the possibility of 're-booting' the mystical through these means.

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Reference

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Article

Rethinking the *Unio Mystica*: From McGinn to Ibn ‘Arabī

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Abstract: Research into the *unio mystica* has revealed what seems to be an area of “real discussion” between scholars of different traditions of mysticism, particularly those of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although this research serves as a promising start to the dialogue among scholars, it has also raised many questions about a “shared moment” that is nevertheless expressed in “irreducibly diverse” and distinct ways in each tradition. What purpose, for instance, can generic cross-cultural categories serve when they mean little or nothing to scholars in each tradition? By contrast, tradition-specific vocabularies are profuse and often difficult to represent in interlinguistic contexts without significant explanation. The challenge of translating mystical texts, imagery, and ideas across cultures and linguistic traditions raises obvious concerns about the misrepresentation and distortion of traditions in an environment of post-colonial critique. Nevertheless, the continued promise of dialogue calls for specialists of these traditions—particularly non-western and non-Christian traditions—to approach, assess, re-formulate, and even challenge the categories of mysticism from within the conceptual and theoretical horizons of the traditions that they research. The present study models such an approach to scholarship in mysticism. It offers a (re)formulation of the *unio mystica* from within the theoretical frame of the 12th/13th-century Muslim/Sufi mystic, Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) and early members of his school of thought. By unpacking the primary terms involved in such an account—“God”, the “human being/self”, and “union”—from within the conceptual and theoretical horizons of that tradition, it problematizes the prevailing understanding of the *unio mystica* constructed from the writings of specialists in Christian mysticism. More importantly, it illustrates the payoff in terms of dialogue (incorporating the critique of existing theories) when each tradition operates confidently from its own milieu, developing its own theoretical resources for mysticism rather than prematurely embracing existing ideas or categories.

Keywords: *unio mystica*; mystical consciousness; Bernard McGinn; Muḥyī ’l-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī

1. Introduction: The *Unio Mystica* and the Dialogue Among Traditions

Research into the *unio mystica* has revealed what seems to represent an area of “real discussion” (McGinn 1996a, pp. 185–93 at 186) between scholars of different traditions of mysticism, particularly Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A 1996 study (Idel and McGinn 1996) conducted by Bernard McGinn, Moshe Idel, and colleagues researching these three traditions¹ revealed that the *unio mystica*² represented a “moment” of convergence (Dupré 1996, pp. 3–23 at 3) shared by the three traditions that was “deep and long” (McGinn 1996b, p. vii), and one in which specialists in each tradition could, therefore, engage in “ecumenical dialogue” (McGinn 1996b, pp. vii–ix at viii). The findings of the study, summarized a decade later by McGinn in an entry for the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, revealed that the mystical literatures across these traditions expressed the two basic poles of the *unio mystica*: (1) that of “uniting” (*unitas spiritus*)—an intentional union between God and the

human being/self—which emphasized the continued distinction between the two; and (2) “identity” (*unitas indistinctionis*), which expressed rather the indistinction between God and the human being/self (Dupré 1996, pp. 17–18; McGinn 2005, p. 6335). These two aspects of the *unio mystica* could, it seems, account for and coherently explain the dizzying variety of statements pertaining to “union” found in diverse mystical texts across the three traditions.

Although the study represented a promising start in the dialogue among specialists of these three traditions, it also raised countless questions³ about a putative convergence that is nevertheless expressed in irreducibly diverse ways within each tradition (Dupré 1996, p. 3). Since the term “*unio mystica*” has meant nothing to most mystics and only remains useful today as a generic cross-cultural category chosen by scholars to facilitate dialogue, its value may be questioned by those who reject the very possibility of dialogue across radically incommensurable traditions. By contrast, the terminology developed *within* traditions has been richly elaborated, achieving precise meaning “within the religious language worlds of which” it is part (Sells 1996b, pp. 163–73 at 163). For this reason, specialists naturally worry that generic terms used by scholars today—like “God”—though certainly useful for dialogue, risk erasing many of the vital connections that tradition-specific vocabularies desire to convey in their own contexts—words like *Allāh*, *al-Ḥaqq*, *Wājib al-Wujūd*, and *khudā* in Islamic(ate) traditions, or Brahman, Eiy Sof, YWHW, Son, and Logos in other languages and linguistic traditions.⁴

Of course, the translation of mystical texts, imagery/symbols, and ideas from (pre-modern) traditions into modern languages faces serious challenges that should not be underestimated. Tradition-specific vocabularies are usually difficult to represent in shared/interlinguistic contexts where most readers have no prior access to the tradition. Added to this is the well-founded fear of distorting, misrepresenting, or even destroying⁵ non-western/non-Christian traditions in an era of post-colonial⁶/de-colonial critique (Hernández 2021, p. 177; Doniger 2000, pp. 63–74 at 64). Although these challenges might prevent some from taking up the task, the continued promise of dialogue calls for specialists of different traditions—particularly non-western and non-Christian traditions—to approach, assess, re-formulate, and even challenge the very categories of mysticism from within the theoretical and conceptual horizons of the traditions they research/represent.

Since the categories of modern mysticism have their roots in the academic study of *Western Christian* mysticism (Schmidt 2003; McGinn 1996a, pp. 185–86), and since those categories also typically purport to embrace the teachings of a variety of non-Christian/non-western traditions, it is particularly vital that each tradition of scholarship deploy its own theoretical resources for mysticism from a position of “epistemic sovereignty”⁷, and not through a curated process with some already determined theoretical agenda (Hallaq 2018, pp. 179–228; Lombard 2024). Finally, it is crucial that the dialogue between traditions proceed through the disciplined practice of translation, the assimilation of different perspectives, and the deployment of the ideas of each tradition toward the formulation of new “mystical theory”; and not through the more indeterminate, imaginative, and “magical” art of comparison, which might content itself with a superficial recognition of similarities over a deeper exchange of ideas and perspectives.⁸

The present study models an approach to mysticism that incorporates the above criteria. It offers a (re)formulation of the *unio mystica* from within the conceptual horizons or “worldview”⁹ of the 12th/13th-century Muslim/Sufi mystic, Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), and early members of his school of thought.¹⁰ It also responds to ideas presented by scholars of Christian mysticism—Bernard McGinn, Louis Roy, and Dom Sebastian Moore—from whom a generalized account of the *unio mystica* expressed in terms of the “mystical consciousness” may be constructed. In doing so, it shows where an Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker

today might take issue with the prevailing understanding of the *unio mystica* in the study of mysticism. The second aim of the paper—the response to McGinn and colleagues (hereafter McGinn et al.)—should be taken as a provocation more than a substantive critique, since it is not directed toward any individual scholar, each of whom has a unique approach to the problem.¹¹ I am no scholar of Christian mysticism myself to presume to have understood their ideas perfectly, and my primary aim is rather to illustrate a type of critique that could be performed in the service of dialogue between traditions.

A more specific reason for incorporating critique into this study is to demonstrate how the acceptance of prevailing theories can risk distorting the perspectives of another tradition. In order to avoid potential mis-readings and mis-applications of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas (or those of his followers), this paper problematizes the prevailing understanding of the *unio mystica* before turning to an Ibn ‘Arabīan account. I have pointed to specific problem areas in the writings of McGinn et al. in my footnotes for those who might wish to pursue a more sustained critique of their ideas. This would be a valuable exercise, and another way of extending dialogue between two traditions of scholarship. However, more valuable for nurturing such dialogue is the introduction of new ideas and perspectives from different (non-western) traditions, and my principal aim has been to offer an alternative (more robust) theory of the *unio mystica* developed from an Ibn ‘Arabīan theoretical framework. Taking these goals together, this paper reveals some of the payoffs—(1) the introduction of new ideas into an existing conversation, and (2) the critique of a potentially destructive hegemony¹²—that are likely to accrue to those who are willing to engage the categories of mysticism from within their own traditions of scholarship, assiduously working to achieve and maintain their theoretical independence.

Toward these interrelated aims, this paper proceeds in the following manner. In Section 2, I present an account of the *unio mystica* generalized from the writings of McGinn et al. on the topic, which I subsequently problematize from the point of view of a contemporary Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker. In Sections 3–5 (the three core sections of the paper), I develop an account of the *unio mystica* (or re-formulate the prevailing one) from within an Ibn ‘Arabīan theoretical frame by elaborating the meanings of its three primary terms: “God”, the “human being/self”, and “union”. Throughout my discussion in Sections 3–5, I show how an Ibn ‘Arabīan approach to the *unio mystica* improves upon that of McGinn et al., solving problems/puzzles that are unexplained by that account. In the main text of these three sections, I present the basic outlines of an Ibn ‘Arabīan theory of “union”, which should be legible to any patient and committed reader. However, since that account relies on the specialized vocabulary developed by Ibn ‘Arabī and his early followers, I have also explained some of the terminology used to develop that account in my footnotes. These constitute something like a running commentary on the main text of the paper. Finally, in my conclusion, I reiterate why a dialogical approach to scholarship in mysticism, proceeding through the confident and self-assured independence of each tradition, will enrich the contemporary study of mysticism, more than existing approaches that tend to focus on the construction of typologies and classifications.

2. Problematizing the *Unio Mystica* in McGinn et al.

The *unio mystica*—the “union” between “God” and the “human being/self”—in its most popular meaning might seem to refer to the vague and subjective feeling of “proximity” periodically felt by certain individuals (mystics) toward some higher “reality”. Experts in mysticism today no longer believe the naïve view that the term refers primarily to an “experience” of that reality, one characterized by “ineffability” and the loss of individual awareness in the face of that overwhelming “presence”.¹³ In fact, there is nothing at all vague or subjective about the *unio mystica*, which has been explained in rigorous detail by

the great theorists of the Abrahamic traditions and surely by theorists of other traditions as well. Since the expression—“union” or the *“unio mystica”*—finds its origin and development in Western Christian sources, we should not be surprised to see that specialists of that tradition have most thoroughly developed its meaning.

Scholars of Christian mysticism—e.g., the Benedictine monk Sebastian Moore, the Dominican scholar Louis Roy, and the Chicago Divinity School historian of religions, Bernard McGinn—have presented in some of their writings, an approach to the *unio mystica* grounded in a theory of *consciousness*, specifically in what some of them have termed the *mystical consciousness*.¹⁴ In other words, they have explained the meaning of “union” between “God” and the “human being/self” as a meeting (“uniting”) of “human consciousness” with “divine consciousness”,¹⁵ and the overcoming of the former by the latter (“identity”). Their discussions of the *unio mystica* also draw from and seek to coherently and self-consistently explain the multitude of statements of Christian mystics¹⁶ pertaining both to the pole of “uniting” as well as to the pole of “identity”.

Bernard McGinn presented a useful summary of a theory of the mystical consciousness in his 2008 article-length study, “Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal”. As he clarifies there, the mystical consciousness is characterized by a continual “uniting” with “God” (the *unitas spiritus*),¹⁷ the latter understood as a “co-presence” found within the mystic’s consciousness; or rather as a kind of “consciousness-beyond” or “meta-consciousness” (to use a term offered by Thomas Merton) (McGinn 2008, pp. 44–63 at 47, 48). Whereas ordinary human consciousness involves acts of loving and knowing together with the self-awareness (and intentionality) of the human subject who acts and knows, the mystical consciousness adds a further element, namely an “infinite other”, who/which is not grasped as another object of consciousness¹⁸ but an “infinite ground”¹⁹ of knowing and an endless source of loving that transforms the mystic’s consciousness and becomes evident in his actions (McGinn 2008, pp. 47, 51–53; Roy 2003, p. xv).

Basing itself on the “transcendental method” of the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan, the account presented by McGinn has the apparent advantage of being agnostic toward any specific theological understanding of God. In the mystical consciousness, God is not verified, intuited, or apprehended as an existing real object “out there”, nor as an existing real object “within”. Whatever the word “God” could possibly mean in such an understanding, no positive claims (none of the contentious claims of theology) can be made about “Him”. Nevertheless, as McGinn avers, the meaning of “union” is that the self-transcending subject, transformed by this mysterious co-presence, and motivated by an infinite desire to know and love, pursues the right values in life, makes correct judgments about the nature of reality, and acts lovingly and wisely toward others.

It is important to stress here that McGinn and his colleagues do not take it as a verifiable fact that the mystic has achieved any genuine contact with a higher reality, even though they speak of a mysterious presence (“God”) that permeates the mystic’s consciousness. To affirm a recognizable God would be to engage in theology, which they apparently wish to avoid, since here a Christian theology would come into conflict with the equivalent “theologies” of other traditions, wherever a positive concept or image of God (or equivalent) is articulated and affirmed.²⁰ A “critically realist” account of union must therefore be uneasy with the “God of theology”. “Critical realism” would also have scholars direct their attention not to the objectivity of the mystic’s consciousness, which it does not wish to verify by its own methods, but rather the objectivity of the mystic’s way of life—which it can (apparently) verify as good, ethical, and desirable for human beings. It is the exemplary life of the mystic that then indirectly (and perhaps unoffensively) authenticates the mysteriously transformed subjectivity gained in “union” (McGinn 2008, p. 47).

Unfortunately, the “critical realism” offered by McGinn et al. turns much of the terminology of union into ambiguous apophatic “God talk”. One might ask these scholars, for instance, how is it even possible to speak of “God” as a “co-presence” permeating the mystical consciousness, an “infinite other”, the “final end” of his loving, and the “infinite ground” of his knowing, without affirming an “ontology of consciousness”²¹ to ground these expressions? The flaw in this approach, from an Ibn ‘Arabīan point of view, is that it fails to take seriously the reality of self-transcendence, since transcendence must be objectively real, and also irreducible to ethics—a weak foundation—for these thinkers.²² The emphasis on the apophatic approach to God found in the theories of McGinn et al. instead works to flatten consciousness, rendering the unknowable “God” and “His” mysterious “co-presence” relatively meaningless or at least unoffensively ambiguous. The presence of this “God”—the “infinite other”—is simply accepted as an inexplicable gift that “in some way” emerges (McGinn 2008, p. 48) within an individual who is somehow destined to be a mystic. The authenticity of the mystic’s subjectivity, for its part, is only explicable in terms of his exemplary comportment in this world, which possesses an unspecified but apparently semi-causal relationship to the emergence of the mystical consciousness. The problem here, for an Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker, is that without an ontology of consciousness, all that can be described as “beyond” ordinary consciousness vanishes into a cloud of unknowing, which is a fate that McGinn et al. seem to prefer for it, since it allows an empirically grounded (“critically realist”) account to fill the vacuum.²³

For these same reasons, McGinn et al. cannot rigorously explain the meaning of “uniting” or “identity” attested by Christian mystics in a compelling and self-consistent way, since the mystics would surely have believed that self-transcendence had a foundation in “reality”, even if they did not express this idea as I do presently. The account of McGinn et al., in particular, has no way to take seriously the claim of “identity”, which was sometimes articulated by mystics in terms of the substitution of the operations of “human consciousness”—sight, hearing, speech, etc.—by those of “divine consciousness”.²⁴ By contrast, an Ibn ‘Arabīan approach to the *unio mystica*, which grounds “authentic subjectivity” in “Real-True Being/Consciousness”, is far more capable of weaving the statements of mystics together within a self-consistent narrative. It offers a “critically realist” account of the *unio mystica* rooted in “the Real” Itself, and not in the most contingent and evanescent (“unreal”) dimensions of reality. Now it remains only to present that account. In what follows (Sections 3–5 of this paper), I offer an approach to the *unio mystica* developed from the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and early members of his school.²⁵

3. An Ibn ‘Arabīan Approach to the *Unio Mystica* I: The Meaning of “God”

A major obstacle to a robust and self-consistent account of the *unio mystica* is that the three basic terms that give meaning to such an account—“God”, the “human being/self”, and “union”—are all ambiguous interlinguistic expressions. As Michael Sells observes, for scholars of Islam and Sufism, the various meanings held together by these three expressions are embedded within an overlapping set of (at least five) language worlds²⁶ found within premodern Islamic intellectual, religious, and literary cultures (Sells 1996a, pp. 87–124 at 88). Both literary and theoretical articulations of “union” could be found in the vast heritage of poetry and prose literature on love, which included the Arabic *nasīb* (elegy) or the Persian *ghazal* (love lyric) and its vernacular counterparts (e.g., in Turkish or Urdu). If the “union” of lover and beloved in poetry was figurative (*majāzī*) and ambiguous, it was presented more explicitly in prose works, where authors could explain that they had human–human “union” in mind, or rather the “union” between “God” and the “human being/self” (or both at once).²⁷ Many Muslim theorists (Sufi and non-Sufi alike) restricted

their discussions to human–human love/union, and even considered a particular kind of union between human beings to represent the highest ideal.²⁸

Other Sufi theorists believed that “divine–human union” was the most real and truest form of union achievable in life, since God was after all “The Real” (*al-Ḥaqq*), and therefore the source of all reality and truth in the world.²⁹ To understand what they meant, readers (and we today) have to delve into a vast body of specialized Sufi literature, since it is there that the expressions that we translate as “God”, the “human being/self”, and “union” in contemporary discourses carried more precise meanings that we can begin to understand. To begin, scholarly Muslim readers knew that the word “*Allāh*”,³⁰ which is the most obvious premodern equivalent to our word “God”, had three basic meanings in theological (*kalām*) and Sufi discourses. Depending on the context, it could refer to the Essence (*Dhāt*), the Names and Attributes (*Asmāʾ wa Ṣifāt*), the Acts (*Afʿāl*), or all of them at once.³¹

The significance of these different “levels” or meanings of “God” will become apparent in the course of the discussion.³² For now, it is important to observe that by the time of Ibn ʿArabī and his early followers, theoretically inclined Sufis began to equate the Essence with “Being per se” (*Wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa*).³³ This was an important move for several reasons, the most important of which was that it fostered the development of a sophisticated language for expressing the relationship between God (*Allāh*) and “everything besides God” (*mā siwāʾ Allāh*) that wielded considerable explanatory power. God—referring now to the Essence—was “Necessary Being” (*Wājib al-Wujūd*), or the Being that could not *not* be. Everything else was “possible being” (*mumkin al-wujūd*), which meant it could be or could not be (Chittick 1994b, pp. 70–111 at 75; 1989, p. 116; 1994a, p. 40). The difference, expressed in another way, was that God was “Real-True Being” (*al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq*)—“the Real-Truth” (*al-Ḥaqq*)³⁴ being a Qurʾānic name that could denote the Essence—while everything else was “metaphorical” (*majāzī*) being (Chittick 1994b, p. 75; 1994a, p. 17). The further implication was that possible being was “unreal” (*bāṭil*) by itself, and only real through something else, that something being ultimately Real-True Being.³⁵

Another important point about the language of *wujūd* was that it implicitly connected “Being” with “Consciousness”, the latter being an expression whose modern sense is difficult to find in the writings of Ibn ʿArabī and his followers. Still, *wujūd* presented readers with a subtle and vital connection, since the Arabic dictionaries indicated that *wujūd* also meant “finding”. In fact, the active and passive participles of the same Arabic root, “Finder” (*al-Wājid*) and “Found” (*al-Mawjūd*), were discussed by early Muslim theologians as Names of God. What this meant for Ibn ʿArabī and his followers was that God is the Being that necessarily finds and is necessarily found (lacking nothing within It/Himself and finding all within It/Himself).³⁶ All other things may find and may be found at some time or another, or they may neither find nor be found at all. Some “existent things” (*mawjūdāt*)—inanimate objects, like stones—are found by God and may be found by human beings, while they themselves never find at all,³⁷ since they do not possess faculties of perception. In all cases, God (the Essence) is the Real-True Finder and the Real-True Found. Before Ibn ʿArabī, the Sufi theorist Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī (d. 555/1111), wrote “there is nothing in *wujūd* but God (*Allāh*)” (Ghazālī 2005, p. 393; 1998, p. 16). From Ibn ʿArabī’s point of view, what he meant was that “there is nothing in existence but God” and that “there is nothing in *finding* but God”³⁸ or “nothing in *consciousness* but God”.³⁹

The foregoing should clarify what are perhaps the two most important objections to McGinn et al.’s theory of the mystical consciousness from an Ibn ʿArabīan perspective: (1) there can be no account of the mystical consciousness that does not begin with “Consciousness per se” (*Wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa*).⁴⁰ “Meta-consciousness” or “consciousness-beyond” cannot find real meaning apart from Real-True Consciousness/Being. In other words, no “ascent” (*ʿurūf*) to the mystical consciousness would be

possible if Real-True Being/Consciousness had not first “descended” (*nuzūl*) to our ordinary/mundane level. Once again, the major weakness that besets the account of McGinn et al. is the absence of a “Real-True” foundation for the mystical consciousness⁴¹—a compelling explanation for the mysterious co-presence—which Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers offer.

(2) McGinn’s discussion of “God” by way of the mystical consciousness is also too ambiguous, shrouded as it is in the mystery of unknowing. McGinn, Roy, and Moore point out in their respective treatments that “God” is not intended primarily as an object (of conceptions or images)—i.e., the God of positive theology—which is an important clarification, but one that does not explain enough.⁴² For instance, for Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers, “God” cannot refer to a second “essence” (*dhāt*) dwelling within the human being/self or a shared “existence” (*wujūd*) between them. Why? For one, Ibn ‘Arabī believed that “the realities do not change” (*al-ḥaqā’iq lā tatabaddal*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 65, 75, 141, 338–39). What changes are the accidents or properties of things, which constantly undergo transformation in this world through “Self-disclosure” (*tajallī*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 61, 97, 102). In reality, God (*Dhāt*) remains forever and eternally Himself and human beings/selves (*dhawāt*) likewise remain forever themselves in their eternal realities.

If God is Being, and human beings seem to exist in this world, their existence/being is only “metaphorical” and God’s is “real.” So again, the actual situation (*naḥs al-amr*) is that Being belongs to God. Insofar as human beings are anything at all (and not nonexistent, *ma’dūm*⁴³), it is only God who is “found” (*mawjūd*) within a non-existent “locus of manifestation” (*mazhar*),⁴⁴ where His Names/Attributes (e.g., “The Formgiver” [*al-Muṣawwir*], Q. 59:24) are displayed. For instance, God (the Essence) may disclose Himself in an “imaginal” or “conceptual” “form” (*ṣūra*) corresponding to His Reality in the “mental being” (*wujūd dhihnī*) of the mystic, who is himself a human form reflecting the Name “Formgiver”.⁴⁵ But insofar as every “form” of God is different from God Himself (*Dhāt*), nothing at all is found. What is found is only Nondelimited Being delimited by the non-existent properties of the human being/self, or its reality (*ḥaqīqa*) or root (*aṣl*),⁴⁶ which establish it as a possibility in Being (Chittick 1989, pp. 96–97). Being per se transcends all the delimitations It assumes, and apophysis assures us that God (the Essence) stands above and beyond Its manifestations, forever beyond the reach of ordinary mortals.

The broader point needs to be stated again, but now more explicitly. For an Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker, what grounds any account of the encounter between God and human beings/selves is that God is the Real-Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*), which means He is the source of all reality, truth, and objectivity (*ḥaqīqa*) in the world, as well as the source of the authentic subjectivity of the mystical consciousness, since He is also Real-True Consciousness (*al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq*). For Ibn ‘Arabī, the two are not separate, whereas McGinn et al. have chosen to be silent both about the God who is Real-True Being as well as the God who is a mental and imaginal object of positive theology. At the same time, they poetically and ambiguously affirm an unknowable “God” who/that is a mysterious and inexplicable presence permeating the mystic’s consciousness. For an Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker, to ground the objectivity of the mystical consciousness in the exemplary lives of the mystics is to put the cart before the horse: to explain the Real in terms of the metaphorical, or the higher in terms of the lower. If being/consciousness is indeed primary and “matter” is secondary, as scientific research has begun to show,⁴⁷ McGinn et al. should be comfortable making more robust distinctions between real and derivative forms of consciousness, rather than accepting only a single level with some structure related to intentionality.⁴⁸

The absence of a clear and robust explanation of the expression “God” also makes it challenging for McGinn et al. to join together the God who is a real object in theology with the God who/that is a co-presence in the mystical consciousness in a compelling and self-

consistent way. They wish to be agnostic toward the God who is an object in theology,⁴⁹ and likewise to remain silent about any truly objective foundation to the mystical consciousness. If this foundation is not the God of theology who might be abandoned by the mystic in the “authentic subjectivity”, it must surely be a God beyond theology. Have they turned “meta-consciousness” or “consciousness-beyond” into a silent God?⁵⁰

An Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker has no problem wedding Real-True Being/Consciousness (the “God beyond theology”) with the God of theology within a single self-consistent narrative. Since Consciousness and Being are united in *Wujūd*, whatever “authentic subjectivity” could possibly mean, and whatever objectivity might be found in a mystic’s comportment in this world, derive from one and the same source. Both stem from his degree of contact with Real-True Being/Consciousness (i.e., with “union” precisely). I will present an Ibn ‘Arabīan account of “authentic objectivity–subjectivity” in the next two sections. As for the God of positive theology, Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers made it clear that the judgments an individual has about God as an “object of belief” are judgments about the God who can be known.⁵¹ They refer to the God described positively by the Names and Attributes (the Divinity, *al-ulūha*), which do not grasp God Himself (the Essence).⁵² They have no access to Being per se (*Wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa*), or the “Reality of Being” (*Ḥaqīqat al-Wujūd*). If they seek knowledge about the Essence, they can only grasp Its meaning indirectly through the Names/Attributes that describe God as inaccessible and unknowable.⁵³ Human beings can neither know nor become the Real as such. There are limits—epistemological and ontological—to union, as we will see below.

McGinn et al. seem to be committed to the view that “uniting” and “identity” imply the ultimate loss or falling away of every concept or image of God.⁵⁴ They wish to absolutize Meister Eckhart’s profession of “atheism” (a theological and discursive dis-ontologizing of God), turning God into “no-thing”. For an Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker, this dis-ontologizing of God in the “ascent” (*‘urūj*) to Real-True Being/Consciousness is not absolute.⁵⁵ The “Gods created in beliefs” never fall away at the levels proper to them—e.g., in conceptual and imaginal being.⁵⁶ Human beings always possess concepts and images of God, which are forms of Real-True Being. Those who gain consciousness of God through God—i.e., those who move closer toward Real-True Being/Consciousness—begin to see that every knotting or coloration in the mind or imagination is a delimitation of God (the Essence). They also learn that some “Gods knotted in beliefs” are more objectively grounded than others. This entails relativization, not abandonment of the God of theology, who will be continually re-conceptualized and re-imagined (tied, untied, and re-tied) as a knot of belief in the mystic’s consciousness. An Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker might say that the truth/reality of particular beliefs is relative (*nisbī*), and that their value is predicated precisely on the degree to which they open toward “nondelimitation”⁵⁷ (Chittick 1994a, pp. 152–55).

4. An Ibn ‘Arabīan Approach to the *Unio Mystica* II: The Meaning of the “Human Being/Self”

To talk about the “human being/self” in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and his school is to speak of a reality that is inseparable from God, since human beings possess a “deiform nature”. To separate the two would thus be to invalidate any objective foundation for the reality of union, which remains a fundamental problem in the theory of the mystical consciousness offered by McGinn et al. As we saw earlier, Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers distinguished between God (the Essence), and “all that is other than God” (*mā siwā’ Allāh*). Thus, to understand the relationship between God and human beings, we have to first understand how God and “everything else” come to be related; a relationship that Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers expressed in terms of (1) the Essence (*Dhāt*) and Its “manifestation”

(*ẓuhūr*); (2) God and His “Self-disclosure” (*tajallī*); or (3) the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) and creation (*al-khalq*); each of these being useful in different contexts and discussions.⁵⁸

Our specific task in this paper has been to understand how ordinary human consciousness and the “mystical consciousness” (expressed now in Ibn ‘Arabīan terms) are related to Real-True Being/Consciousness. To this end, we must first clarify that human beings, like everything else in cosmic existence, are among the never-repeating Self-disclosures of God,⁵⁹ or never-ending manifestations of the Essence. All creatures (not just human beings) are therefore connected to God and are inseparable from Him in their “roots”. Unlike other creatures, however, human beings hold a special distinction in that they display (or are capable of displaying) Real-True Being/Consciousness “perfectly” or “completely”, which is not a wider possibility across the domain of cosmic existence.⁶⁰ Although most human beings—whom Ibn ‘Arabī sometimes calls “animal human beings” (*al-insān al-ḥayawān*)—do not live up to this ideal; certain human beings—those whom he calls “perfect/complete human beings” (*al-insān al-kāmil*)⁶¹—have come into this world as, or have made efforts to become, perfect/complete “forms of the Real-Truth” (*ṣuwar al-Ḥaqq*). What this means, to invoke another set of correlative expressions used by Ibn ‘Arabīan thinkers, is that God has become the “meaning” (*ma‘nā*) in the invisible world to which their “forms” (*ṣuwar*) correspond in the world of created existence.

A more specific set of expressions that helped Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers explain the potential perfection/completeness in human beings vis à vis God and other forms of cosmic existence, were the terms “gathering” (*jam‘*) and “dispersion” (*farq*, *tafrīq*). With these, readers could understand the special distinction and potential for perfection of human beings in terms of the “all-comprehensiveness/all-gatheringness” (*jam‘iyya*) of the “human-divine form”.⁶² “All-Gatheringness” is a description that applies first and foremost to the Essence and pertains absolutely to God alone. If perfect/complete human beings can be said to reflect the gatheringness possessed by the Essence, other creatures, by contrast, only display different degrees of dispersion, or less complete forms of gatheringness.⁶³

With these ideas in mind, manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) can now be understood as a process whereby the Essence displays the perfections comprised within It—these being related in the first place to the Names and Attributes—vis à vis the infinite possibilities in Being. If the “Hidden Treasure”⁶⁴ of the Essence, utterly transcendent above Its manifestations, can be understood as an All-Gathering Oneness (*aḥadiyyat al-jam‘*) that negates all distinctions between things (*ashyā’*),⁶⁵ this “Hidden Treasure” becomes dispersed in the world of cosmic existence through manifestation, Self-disclosure, and creation. At the lowest point of manifestation, which is the point where human beings typically find themselves in their ordinary/mundane condition, the perfection that corresponds to that original “all-gatheringness” (*jam‘iyya*) has become infinitely dispersed and potentially lost but for the “human-divine form”—uniquely capable of displaying⁶⁶ “here and now”, the perfection that belonged/belongs to the Essence “at the beginning”.⁶⁷ “Gatheringness” therefore points to the unique role played by the perfect/complete human being in this world.

There are, of course, several stages of manifestation through which Real-True Being/Consciousness travels before coming to the ordinary being/consciousness of “animal human beings”, which Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers explained in detail. Different types of creatures—elements, minerals, plants, animals, etc.—were related to these different stages, each possessing a relative “gatheringness” or “dispersion” proper to its level in the cosmic hierarchy. In each form of cosmic existence, moreover, the relative gatheringness or dispersion displayed by each creature has its root in God. Thus, every form of gatheringness manifests “here and now” the “One-Onliness” (*aḥadiyya*) and “All-Gatheringness” of the “Transcendent” Essence. Similarly, every form of dispersion (*farq*, *tafrīq*) displays “here and now” the multiplicity comprised in the “One-Allness” (*wāḥidiyya*) of the “Immanent”

Essence, with its affirmation of every distinct possibility of Being. Finally, since we know that gathering and dispersion are relative terms—animals being relatively gathered created forms vis à vis plants, and relatively dispersed vis à vis human beings—we can now understand that human beings, alone, are able to completely reverse the trajectory of dispersion and achieve an intensity of being/consciousness that might be expressed in terms of the “mystical consciousness” (reformulated in Ibn ‘Arabīan terms).

Of course, becoming an “all-gathering created being” (*al-kaawn al-jāmi‘*), one that can properly be described as a form of the Real-Truth is not a simple matter, and most human beings, in the course of their lives in this world, remain all-gathering forms only *in potentia*. What the process of actualizing the human-divine form entails, from an Ibn ‘Arabīan point of view, is a series of relative “gatherings”⁶⁸, each corresponding to one major stage in the reversal of the trajectory of dispersion through which Being/Consciousness underwent and continually undergoes in Its descent to our ordinary or mundane level.

“Gathering” and “dispersion” were thus discussed by theorizing Sufis not only to explain the “descent” (*nuzūl*) of Being/Consciousness to the level of ordinary being/consciousness—this being related to “manifestation”; but also to explain the “ascent” (*‘urūj*) of being/consciousness back to its source—this being related to “witnessing the manifestation”.⁶⁹ On this ascending arc of being/consciousness’s return voyage, Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers often spoke of three or four “journeys” (*safar, asfār*) or “voyages” (*sayr*)⁷⁰ to the All-Gatheringness of the One-Only Essence. Not surprisingly, they tended to describe the completeness achieved at the end of the fourth journey (achieved by exceedingly few individuals) as the realization of the “One-Onliness of Gathering” (*aḥadiyyat al-jam‘*),⁷¹ a station that perfectly mirrors the All-Gathering Oneness of the One-Only Essence.

The three/four journeys, of course, were complex, each comprising multiple stations that were described in detail in the technical treatises of Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers. What these treatises reveal is that this particular tradition of mysticism had a sophisticated manner of explaining the numerous and differentiated “intensifications” of being/consciousness that characterize the growth of ordinary consciousness toward the “mystical consciousness”. In fact, for an Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker, the first appearance of the “mystical consciousness” corresponds to a relatively low degree of gatheringness achieved by the voyager at the very beginning of his return voyage to the Essence, when he first begins to “witness” Self-disclosures of God in the “outward” things of this world.⁷²

But what of the many paradoxes—the various moments of “loss-in-finding” or “finding-within-loss”—that the human “self” encounters on this journey of return to the One-Only Essence, which are so difficult to explain for those who have not theorized Being/Consciousness as rigorously as Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers? How, for instance, can the self sometimes appear to vanish (“to unknow”⁷³ or “to be un/deformed” (Roy 2003, pp. 75, 77; McGinn 2008, p. 53)) in the face of a divine “fullness” that swallows it whole,⁷⁴ paradoxically rendering God a “no-thing” as well? Or what does it mean that the loss of the self at an earlier moment is often followed by a fullness (a “self-realization”) that verges on “deification” at a later moment.⁷⁵ McGinn et al. have trouble explaining these paradoxes in a robust way, since they do not distinguish two levels of being/consciousness (e.g., “real” and “metaphorical”).

For an Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker, these paradoxes can be correlated to the defining moments in the return voyage to the One-Only Essence. To “unbecome” is to reverse the process of “becoming”, or to move toward a stage of gathering that mirrors the All-Gathering Oneness of the Essence. Since the Essence comprehends the roots or the realities of all things “before” Its manifestation, thereby being determined by “no specific thing”,⁷⁶ the voyager on the return journey to the Essence must also become no specific thing, escaping the domination of any particular Name/Attribute to the exclusion of others.

It should not be too difficult to understand that when an individual human being/self moves to a stage of gathering by which he has been able to overcome and harmonize the dispersion that characterizes and dominates the lower stage, his consciousness will be experienced as drastically and profoundly different from the higher vantage point.

In other words, the “self”—the answer to the question “who am I?”—with which the voyager identifies at an earlier stage of the journey will appear to undergo loss in the transition to a higher stage (this being a period of “uniting” in the terminology of McGinn et al.). What will be realized at the higher level is that the lower “dispersed self” has now become integrated into a more gathered self—an expanded identity in being/consciousness. In its higher gatheringness, the newly expanded self no longer identifies with or operates from the lower level.⁷⁷ This is why some of Ibn ‘Arabī’s early followers often spoke of an “ableness” or “stability” (*tamkīn*) gained by the successful voyager after a period of “coloration” or “variegation” (*talwīn*).⁷⁸ In the intervals of coloration, the self loses its grasp on things that once seemed stable, achieving a coloration related to its voyage to the Essence by way of the Names and Attributes. Each of these losses is relative since they have to do with the voyager’s inability to overcome the domination of a particular Name/Attribute. When the voyager has finally achieved a foothold at a higher level, he will have overcome the domination of this Name/Attribute without giving up the coloration related specifically to It. This point must be emphasized: the coloration itself is not given up, only the misidentification of the self with the lower level that results from coloration. In fact, coloration and stability—like dispersion and gathering—are relative terms; and it is more accurate to speak of the voyager’s situation in terms of “stability in coloration” (*al-tamkīn fī ’l-talwīn*) or “coloration in stability” (*al-talwīn fī ’l-tamkīn*).

One of the obstacles that prevents the voyager from advancing to a stage of relative gathering—which again depends on his ability to gather and properly harmonize the meanings of the Names/Attributes within his all-gathering form—is that his consciousness/being becomes dominated by a particular Name/Attribute due to his “mystical experience”.⁷⁹ For instance, readers of Sufi literature will know well that the voyager sometimes faces overpowering experiences in which he is no longer able to differentiate between himself and God in the witnessing of a particular Divine Self-disclosure⁸⁰—an experience described by theorists as “intoxication” (*sukr*). Eventually, he may gain a foothold at a higher station of ableness—described as “sobriety” (*ṣaḥw*)—in which the attributes that had prevailed over him before his intoxication have now become “subjugated” by another set of attributes that have emerged from a root (*aṣl*) pertaining to his reality (*ḥaqīqa*)⁸¹ in the invisible world, or from the Reality of realities (*Ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqā’iq*).

So long as the voyager is pulled toward the “experiences” of an emerging “mystical consciousness”, his voyaging through different states and stations will be determined by a coloration related to the fact that the Name “Outwardly Manifest” (*al-Zāhir*) has not yet been stably recognized within *all* “outward” things (loci of manifestation), including his self, its powers, and organs. Due to his mystical experiences (coloration), this voyager’s wayfaring will tend to become dominated by the “properties” (*aḥkām*)⁸² of one of the Names/Attributes that are subordinate to the Name “Outwardly Manifest”, such as “Creator” (*al-Khāliq*), or “Knower” (*al-‘Alīm*), or one of the other Names/Attributes by which God has revealed Himself in scripture to be similar (*tashbīh*) to His creatures.⁸³

At this point in his voyage, the wayfarer is still striving toward an ableness (*tamkīn*) that would allow him to complete the first of his journeys.⁸⁴ Without this foothold, he risks terminating his voyage prematurely, so he must persevere and make efforts to overcome his dispersion. Once he has achieved the sought after gatheringness, through which he now stably recognizes the “Outwardly Manifest” in all things, including his own powers/faculties, e.g., hearing, seeing, speaking, power, he will have reached a new level

of being/consciousness as well as “self-realization”. Indeed, he will have taken a major step from metaphorical being/consciousness toward Real-True Being/Consciousness. Whereas before, the voyager had witnessed his hearing, seeing, speaking, and power as separate from Hearing, Seeing, Speaking, and Power, his station is now such that he is not veiled from witnessing this Divine “Witness” (*ma‘iyya*)⁸⁵ in all outward loci of manifestation. The scope of his gatheringness, the intensity of his being/consciousness, and the strength of his self-realization are attested by his perfect ableness in the continual witnessing of the Divine Self-disclosures in all outward loci of manifestation (coloration).

I have been using “self” in the foregoing discussion in a way that approximates “consciousness”, referring more precisely to the crystallization of an identity within being/consciousness. The Arabic word scholars typically translate as “self” is *nafs*, which is also a reflexive pronoun used in constructions like “himself” or “itself”. In Sufism, the word belies the fact that the reality to which it points is at least as differentiated as the stages of the ascending voyage of being/consciousness itself. Anyone familiar with Sufi literature knows that the self can be differentiated into “spirit” (*rūh*), “heart” (*qalb*), and “secret core” (*sirr*) among other levels⁸⁶ in a vast spectrum of concepts pertaining to the self. Some of that complexity is intimated by the *ḥadīth*, “whoever knows himself (*nafsahu*) knows his Lord (*rabbahu*)”,⁸⁷ a scriptural statement that points to the intimate connection between “selfhood” and “lordhood”⁸⁸ that characterizes the voyager’s return journey. The true lord of something might be described as its “reality” *in divinis*, which is the “Hidden Treasure’s” eternal knowledge of it that governs its journey in this world.

“Recognition” (*ma‘rifa*, *ma‘rifat*, or *‘irfān* in contemporary Persian/Urdu) ties the self to “consciousness”, since what is recognized by the self is nothing but its own reality *in divinis*. It is through “self-knowledge” or the “mystical consciousness”, in other words, that the self rejoins with God. This makes *ma‘rifa* perhaps the closest *single word* in Islamic(ate) languages to “mysticism” in much of its current usage. The self at the beginning of the voyage must open its “doors” (*abwāb*) and break through to its “interiors” (*abṭūn*).⁸⁹ In doing so, it achieves a deeper self-recognition (*ma‘rifa*) that is simultaneously “lord-recognition”, i.e., the recognition of its own reality *in divinis*, which “lords over” it for eternity. Put differently, the self’s recognition of its innermost reality (its *dhāt*) represents a gatheringness in consciousness that is as close to Real-True Consciousness as human beings can achieve; corresponding to the recognition of the Real-True Being (the Essence, the “lord” corresponding to this “all-gathering self” at the end of its voyage).⁹⁰

Through self-knowledge, the wayfarer overcomes the metaphorical consciousness that characterizes the ordinary/mundane human level and achieves the fullness of the “mystical consciousness” at the end of its long and arduous voyage. All the “found things” (*mawjūdāt*)—the various entities “out there” or “within”—seen at the beginning of the voyage as separate existences, are recognized by the one who has reached the deepest interior of the self as manifestations of the Essence, the true Lord of all.

5. An Ibn ‘Arabīan Approach to the *Unio Mystica* III: The Meaning of “Union”

The discussion of the prior two sections should convey to readers why Sufi authors were often criticized for speaking about the “union” between “God” and “human beings/selves”. If an impatient or frustrated reader had trouble understanding what was being conveyed in the discussions that explained the relationship between God and the human being/self, they could easily paint those ideas with the brush of one of the well-known heresies in Islam: “incarnationism” (*ḥulūl*) or “unificationism” (*ittiḥād*) (Chittick 1994b, pp. 85–87, 89–91). Nevertheless, if what was meant by these labels was that two “essences” from the same level—e.g., milk and water mixed together⁹¹—or two entities of

differing levels, became joined, one within another (e.g., water in a container⁹²), Muslim theorists who discussed “union” never seemed to countenance such ideas.

As Michael Sells explains, even poetic understandings of union did not easily suggest a union of physical bodies—the sense of union conjured by poets having been related more closely to the imagery of return to a lost paradise than to sexual union (Sells 1996a, pp. 93–94). Even in prose discussions of human–human union, theorists tended to believe that physical union was less perfect than non-physical union (Giffen 1971, p. 7). If it was a question of the close-to-perfect joining together of two wills (e.g., the single-mindedness of purpose of two lovers in a lawful relationship), this was hardly the sort of “substantial” or “materialist” union suggested by the heresies (Giffen 1994, pp. 420–42 at 426).

As for the terminology used by Sufi theorists like Ibn ‘Arabī, when they spoke about union, they employed a complex set of inter-related terms with overlapping meanings. These could only be appreciated in the contexts in which they were employed. For instance, “conjoining” (*ittiṣāl*) or “unification” (*ittiḥād*) were expressions that could refer to the joining of two sides of a circle. The idea of unification suggested by such an image was the completion of an otherwise incomplete/imperfect figure.⁹³ We have also learned that the term “gathering” (*jam‘*) was used by Sufi theorists to discuss the intensifications of being/consciousness. Ibn ‘Arabī and his early followers made it clear that what they intended by such expressions had nothing to do with two “essences” or “realities” becoming substantially mixed together or coming to share a single existence.

The eternal reality of human beings was non-existence (*‘adam*), while God (the Essence) was the Necessary Being, or the Being that could not *not* be. If union meant anything it all, it could only refer to the fact that the human being/self has now rejoined its root (*aṣl*) in the eternal order—having returned to the perfect servanthood (*‘ubūdiyya*, *‘ubūda*) connected with its “lord” in the Reality of realities.⁹⁴ At this point, the “originated” (*ḥādith*) attributes that belonged to the human being/self have become “subjugated” by the “eternal” (*qadīm*)⁹⁵ attributes that have always been found in/by Real-True Being/Consciousness (*al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq*) but not by the ordinary human consciousness.

Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d. 688/1289), a second-generation follower of Ibn ‘Arabī, in his famous prosimetrical work, *Lamā‘āt* (*Flashes*), reminded his readers that no one says an image is “incarnated within” or “united with” the mirror in which the image is displayed (‘Irāqī 1982, pp. 93–94, 145–46). The same is true of the “form of the Real” appearing in the non-existent locus of manifestation of the voyager in the return voyage to the Real-True Being. The “outer eye” may see how two things—e.g., milk and water, or water and wine—become mixed, and the mind may suppose union to be like this: a confusion of two essences or a mixing of two substances. But the change observed in these examples is only in the properties (*aḥkām*), not in the essences (*dhawāt*) (‘Irāqī 1982, p. 93; 1974, pp. 22–23). The analogy of the mirror reveals the actual situation more precisely. It is not that the mirror exists, the image exists, and two essences become joined, sharing a common existence. In fact, “the realities do not change” (Chittick 1989, pp. 65, 75, 141, 338–39). The one who understands the situation says instead, “there was no image, and then the image appeared”. Or when they see colorless light taking on the various hues and tints of the glass through which it passes, they do not say the reality of light (colorless in itself) has become united with that of glass. Rather, they say, “there was no light, and now light (colorless) has appeared as different colors”. This is the meaning of “union”.⁹⁶

The true situation, recognized (*ma‘rifa*) by the one who has overcome his “metaphorical consciousness” and has gained entry to the mystical consciousness—“the possessor of unveiling” (*ṣāḥib-i kashf*) (‘Irāqī 1982, p. 93; 1974, p. 23)—is in fact that Real-True Being/Consciousness has always been in a state of “union” with this world. If the things of the world were imagined before to possess their own existence (or separate existences),

and then they were seen for a time to possess a metaphorical being/existence, now it is recognized that they never existed in the first place. Ibn ʿArabī explains in an instructive passage from his *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (Meccan Openings):

The Real (*al-Ḥaqq*) is perpetually (*dāʾiman*) in a state of union (*waṣl*) with creation. Through that, He is a God (*ilāh*). This is what is meant by the Qurʾānic saying, “He is with you wherever you are” (Q. 57:4), that is, in every state of non-existence (*ʿadam*) or existence, or its modalities. Such is the actual situation (*naḥs al-amr*), and what takes place for the Folk of Solitude, the Folk of God, is that God gives them vision and unveils their insights until they witness this Witness (*maʿiyya*). This—that is, the recognizer’s (*ʿārif*) witnessing (*shuhūd*)—is what is called union (*waṣl*), because the recognizer has become conjoined (*ittaṣala*) with the witnessing of the actual situation (*mā huwa ʿl-amr ʿalayhi*). (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1911, p. II 480.12; Chittick 1989, p. 365)

From the foregoing, it can be seen that Sufi theorists had a robust explanation for what appears to be the substitution of divine faculties for the human faculties in the “mystical identity” (McGinn’s *unitas indistinctionis*). McGinn has trouble explaining how the human faculties are simultaneously silenced—“emptied and put to rest so that God can work directly from within” (McGinn 2008, p. 58)—while God works as a mysterious presence permeating those very same faculties.⁹⁷ Roy seems to prefer the total abolishment of the human faculties, which then mysteriously become replaced with another kind of “seeing” and “hearing”.⁹⁸ This understanding of identity faces problems that can only be resolved by invoking an ontology of consciousness with at least two levels of perception.

Ibn ʿArabī and his followers explain how the apparent loss of the self (and its faculties) is not at all incompatible with the operation of “divine consciousness” within the voyager’s being/consciousness. The clearest expression of “mystical identity” in Sufi theoretical writings came around discussions of a *ḥadīth* in which God, speaking in the first person, described Himself as the seeing, hearing, and speaking of His devoted servant, as well as his hand, foot, and tongue. When the voyager reaches certain stages of stability/ableness, he comes to recognize in different ways how this was the situation all along. Through Real-True Being/Consciousness, he becomes conscious that the Real was always his tongue, his seeing, hearing, hand, and foot, though he did not know it until he possessed this witnessing.⁹⁹ And what a difference this makes! By returning to Real-True Being/Consciousness, his own being/consciousness has become united to witnessing the situation as it is, not as he falsely surmised it to be beforehand.

As Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī suggests in his poetic description of union, the gatheringness achieved at this stage of self-realization has incorporated, harmonized, and coordinated the dispersion of the lower levels. As we have seen, followers of Ibn ʿArabī often visualized the descent of Being/Consciousness and its subsequent ascent by human beings/selves as two sides of a single circle. The two sides—the divine and the human, eternal and temporal—appeared separate from the ordinary point of view, divided by a fine line. In the fullness of the mystical consciousness, it is now understood that the two were not separate at all. The eternal and the temporal have collapsed into the “eternal now”. Nevertheless, included in this recognition is the awareness that the fine line of separation (*farq*) continues to leave a trace so long as the voyager is alive in this world.¹⁰⁰ So long as the individual being/consciousness remains, the individual self still sees and hears through ordinary vision and audition,¹⁰¹ though we mortals cannot fathom what kind of seeing and hearing this really is. It is the perception of someone who witnesses not just the outer shell of things, but also their realities *in divinis*—the things as they are in themselves—which are the things as they are now, have always been, and forever will be.

6. Conclusions

In the previous three sections, I have offered the bare outlines of a fair account of the *unio mystica* as elaborated from within the theoretical frame of the Sufi/Muslim mystic Ibn ‘Arabī and early members of his school of thought. I have also been calling it an account offered by an Ibn ‘Arabīan thinker today. In my presentation, I have significantly reduced the complexity of the ideas found in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī’s school, since to offer anything more detailed would presume a high degree of specialization and an uncommon interest—even in the committed reader—to delve deeply into the ocean of meanings beneath the language and imagery used by this particular tradition of mysticism.

The central claim of this paper is that a cross-cultural or comparative mysticism of the future should move from this foundation—the careful study of texts and ideas by specialists in each tradition to the point of close familiarity and assimilation. As I mentioned in the introduction, the deployment of the theoretical resources of each tradition must proceed from a position of independence, not through a curated process with some pre-determined theoretical agenda. The robust formulation of a “critical lexicon” of a mysticism that better represents the perspectives of different traditions is only possible through dialogue between specialists capable of translating rich complexes of imagery and ideas in ways that convey meaning to readers with no prior access to the tradition.

Scholars of mysticism once thought that the field should explicitly eschew an approach that takes the “truth claims” of mystics or traditions as a foundation for the “evaluation” of mysticism generally.¹⁰² An implicit claim of the present study is that “theory parity”¹⁰³ in the study of mysticism requires that they do, and that doing so also promises to enrich the field and contribute to a deeper dialogue among specialists. A translation-based approach, moreover, will advance the cause of dialogue more effectively than a “comparison” that operates primarily by way of classification, since it will leverage the robustly developed vocabularies of each tradition as its foundation.¹⁰⁴ It will make smaller leaps across the gaps between traditions from this more “scientific” foundation than the greater leaps typically involved in the “magic” of “comparison”.¹⁰⁵ However long it might take, “theory parity” in the study of mysticism is inevitable as the perspectives of mystics (the “dialectical other”) (Cabezón 2006, pp. 21–38 at 31) become further incorporated into the theoretical frames of specialists and increasingly inform their research.

The hope offered by this paper is that the formation of new “mystical theory” from within the theoretical and conceptual horizons determined by specialists of each tradition will stimulate dialogue by provoking those conducting research in other traditions—here scholars of Christian mysticism—to revisit their sources and answer the challenges raised by each new articulation of theory. It is hoped that the scholarly representatives of each tradition would do so in good faith—through the careful deployment of the theoretical resources of each tradition—hewing as closely as possible to its own linguistic frames. I say “as much as possible” in anticipation of the objection that any project with a “presentist” orientation will suffer from the distortion of the perspectives of the past.

A certain degree of error will perhaps have to be tolerated in the name of a dialogue that will necessarily be iterative as new textual discoveries are made, and tradition-specific literatures continue to be translated and assimilated by specialists. The latter will remain the primary scholarly effort for the foreseeable future, and it is challenging enough. I will be the first to admit that the (premodern) mystic is not very much like most of us in the contemporary academy. We struggle to enter his conceptual world and assimilate his ideas. Nevertheless, he resembles some of us more than others. If scholars of religion have warned their colleagues that it can be problematic to think that we are too much like the people we study, we nevertheless continue to study their texts for what they meant to them (Patton and Ray 2000b, pp. 1–19 at 12). Sooner or later we also begin to study them for

what they mean to us. The 12th century Sufi mystic, Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1209) warned his own colleagues, fellow wayfarers on the Sufi voyage, to doubt that they had arrived at their destination. Though they witnessed astounding things in the “world of imagination” (Chittick 2020, p. 151)¹⁰⁶, they erred in thinking that this was unveiling. Which of these two warnings is more important for scholars to assimilate today?

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Notes

- ¹ These were Moshe Idel (Jewish mysticism), Michael Sells (Islamic mysticism), and McGinn himself (Christian mysticism).
- ² As McGinn explains, the *unio mystica* should be understood primarily as a “term of art”, “a modern creation largely popularized by students of religion”, which enables it to have “a useful, if limited, function” (McGinn 1996a, pp. 185–86). Although occasionally used by patristic authors, “it was actually very rarely used for more than a millennium (c. 500–1550), despite how often mystics spoke of being united with God. The qualifier ‘mystical’ (*mysticus*), whose Christian usage goes back to the second century CE, kept its etymological sense of ‘secret/hidden’, and was used to describe the inner, invisible, aspects of Christian life and practice, especially the spiritual meaning of scripture, its *sensus mysticus*” (McGinn 2020, pp. 404–21). The term seems to have become more popular in the nineteenth century (like “mysticism” itself) (Schmidt 2003), through the academic study of mysticism more than the writings of the mystics themselves.
- ³ As McGinn writes, “We are under no illusion that we have settled all the issues related to the mystery of mystical union. Indeed, we hope that mystical union (if that is even the best term) will appear richer, more complex, and more mysterious to the reader after finishing these essays than at the outset” (McGinn 1996b, pp. vii–ix at viii–ix).
- ⁴ As Michael Sells explains, the meaning of “God” has been understood in radically different ways even within a single language—for instance, an Arab Christian and Muslim understanding of *Allāh*. In Islamic Studies scholarship, “God” has been keyed to a rich and diverse set of terms found in Islamic and Sufi theology—*Allāh*, *al-Ḥaqq*, *al-Raḥmān*, etc. These words, when translated as “God”, lose much of the meaning intended by Sufi authors (Sells 1996b, pp. 163–73 at 164–66). A different set of meanings developed by Muslim “Neoplatonists” writing in Arabic is lost when the Qur’ānic Names “*al-Aḥad*” (the “One-Only”) and “*al-Wāḥid*” (the “One-All”) are not rendered effectively, nuances that have been expertly conveyed in the translations of William C. Chittick (Chittick 2023, pp. 1–19 at 8; 1992, pp. 179–209 at 179–81, 185, 187, 202).
- ⁵ As Richard King points out in his study on the “mystification” of the “Orient”, “We should be aware of the sense in which the study of religion can have iatrogenic consequences for the purported object of its study. . . . Here I am using the term metaphorically to highlight the sense in which religious studies as a cognitive discipline may actually distort or reduce that which it is claiming to investigate and explain” (King 1999, p. 42). King’s approach has been extended by Boaz Huss, who explains how the emergence of the category of “Jewish mysticism” has shaped modern perceptions of the Kabbalah (Huss 2020).
- ⁶ As Wendy Doniger writes, “In this age of multinationalism and the politics of individual ethnic and religious groups, of identity politics and minority politics, to assume that two phenomena from different cultures are ‘the same’ in any significant way is regarded as demeaning to the individualism of each, a reflection of the old racist, colonialist attitude that ‘all wogs look alike’” (Doniger 2000, pp. 63–74 at 64). As Gloria Maité Hernández explains, the anxiety over post-colonial backlash has had the positive consequence of protecting traditions from “false representations and orientalist agendas” (Hernández 2021, p. 177).
- ⁷ That is, without consideration of the ability of those traditions to change the very parameters of scholarship in mysticism, nor any special concern over the manner in which they might enact and effect such a change.
- ⁸ As Doniger explains, comparison fails when analysts presume to “stand outside (presumably, above) phenomena from different cultures and to equate them” (Doniger 2000, p. 64). It also faces criticism when it fails to attend sufficiently to difference, as

Benjamin Ray and Kimberly Patton observe: “comparison in the human sciences has been problematic and unscientific and lacking in any specific rules. It contains a kind of ‘magic,’ [J. Z. Smith] asserts, like Frazer’s idea of homeopathic magic, ‘for, as practiced by scholarship, comparison has been chiefly an affair of the recollection of similarity The procedure is homeopathic The issue of difference has been all but forgotten.’ . . .” (Patton and Ray 2000b, pp. 1–19 at 3–4).

Ann Taves and Egil Asprem have recently urged scholars of religion to shift their concern from “religions” to “worldviews”, a shift that is perhaps less likely to prejudice investigations into the writings of “theologians” or “mystics”. “Worldview” also highlights the coherence of the particular form of rationality presented by a given historical subject or subjectivity (Taves 2020). By seeking to understand each culturally and linguistically specific form of “rationality” (or “worldview”) on its own terms, scholars reduce the risk of inadvertently misrepresenting them.

I mean the direct line of authors and commentators connected to Ibn ‘Arabī’s most influential student and disciple Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d. 673/1274), sometimes discussed in the secondary literature as the School of Ibn ‘Arabī (Chittick 1996).

Moreover, there are notable differences between the three authors on specific points, as I show below.

Destructive when dialogue is not sincere. Marianne Moyaert has shown some of the ways Christian frameworks for inter-religious dialogue effectively instrumentalized other traditions (turning them also into “religions”) to generate discussion and debate that mostly furthered the interests of those who developed the frameworks (Moyaert 2013, pp. 64–86 at 81).

As Edward Howells explains, if the “reality” that the mystic “experiences” may be designated by the word “God”, theorists of mysticism cannot be satisfied with an account that begins and ends with “mystical experience”. Since the “notion of ‘God’ entails a creator who is both universally present and present everywhere equally. . . experience does not easily divide into different kinds where God is more or less present” (Howells 2020, pp. 45–64 at 45). Problematising James’s “marks” of religious experience, Howell explains that “To tell one experience of God from another—to say which are ‘mystical’ and which are not—requires not just certain ‘marks’ of experience but an understanding of how God relates to the world in the first place, and further distinctions concerning the ways that God might be present in human experience” (Howells 2020, p. 45).

My understanding of the mystical consciousness (as a non-specialist of Christian mysticism) draws from Bernard McGinn’s “Mystical Consciousness: A Modest Proposal” (2008), Sebastian Moore’s “Consciousness” (1957), and Louis Roy’s *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers* (2003). All three authors tend to write ambiguously (not systematically) on this topic. I have therefore generalized from their more systematic statements. The theory of the mystical consciousness that I attribute to “McGinn et al.” throughout this paper is therefore a generalized account.

I borrow these expressions from Chapter 5 of Roy’s *Mystical Consciousness: Western Perspectives and Dialogue with Japanese Thinkers* (2003) entitled “Eckhart: When Human Consciousness Becomes Divine Consciousness”. In alluding to the identity between “human” and “divine” consciousness, Roy points to Eckhart’s “mystification” of an Aristotelian scientific claim pertaining to the act of vision. As Eckhart says, when his eye falls upon some wood, in the act of perception, “the wood is my eye”. Vision/perception therefore serves as a useful image of “mystical identity” (McGinn’s *unitas indistinctionis*) (Roy 2003, p. 85).

McGinn has discussed the mystical consciousness in connection with the writings of Eckhart, Cusa, and St. John of the Cross; Roy has incorporated the writings of Eckhart; and Moore, the most poetic of the three, cites from Eckhart and St. Augustine.

The mystic’s consciousness continually “unites” with (and separates from) “God”, its center moving between the two poles of “uniting” and “identity”.

As Moore suggests, from the point of view of consciousness, “God” makes sense less as an “object of consciousness” as “the whole of consciousness” (S. Moore 1957, pp. 305–24 at 314; Roy 2003, p. 44). “God” is more like light: “We look at things in the light, not at the light” (S. Moore 1957, p. 308). Light adds no object to existence, but makes them all visible (Roy 2003, p. 44).

As Moore writes, “Consciousness has no object, but it has an end. I mean, that the process of becoming more conscious is going somewhere. Not towards an object that I shall one day discover, but towards a completeness of itself” (S. Moore 1957, p. 311). Thus, consciousness is “not something that comes to us, but something we come to. Things happen to us, but we happen on consciousness” (S. Moore 1957, p. 312).

Some specialists have decried the inordinate attention paid in modern and post-modern times to “apophysis”. As David Albertson writes, “Apophatic mysticism promises to clear away idolatrous speech about God and often promotes an ideal of imageless contemplation. . . . But then how should we understand its contrary, cataphatic mysticism? Does the positivity of cataphasis possess its own legitimacy, or should it always be superseded? We ought not to oppose the two traditions as if they were competitors, but neither should we fail to notice when one is elevated above the other” (Albertson 2020, pp. 347–68 at 348).

I am forced to use this construction since “ontology” and “epistemology” have been decoupled in many of the relevant modern frameworks and discussions. “Being” and “knowing” (or “consciousness”) are intimately connected in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers, as I show throughout this paper (see n. 29 and n. 37 below).

For this tradition, “ethics” must be objectively grounded in “ontology”, and more specifically in the “deiform nature” of human beings. See, for instance, William Chittick’s “*Marātīb al-taqwā*: Sa‘īd al-Dīn Farḡhānī on the Ontology of Ethics” (Chittick 2022).

As McGinn explains, the “religious consciousness” begins with the gift of love and faith. Christian mystics likewise regard what McGinn calls the mystical consciousness as a gift of God’s love or grace (McGinn 2008, pp. 49–53, 61 n. 29, 62 n. 33).

- Roy wishes to explain statements pertaining to mystical identity in two sections of his chapter on Eckhart—"Is the soul equated with God?" and "The soul's breakthrough to the Godhead?" (Roy 2003, pp. 85–93). Likewise, McGinn wishes to explain the statements of St. John of the Cross and Eckhart who believe "that the inner faculties must be emptied and put to rest so that God can work directly from within" (McGinn 2008, p. 58).
- In what follows, I discuss ideas presented by Ibn ʿArabī; his chief student, Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī; Qūnawī's students Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī (d. 699/1300) and Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī (d. 688/1289); the second-generation student of Qūnawī, ʿAbd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. 730–736/1329–1335); and the student of Kāshānī, Dāwūd Qaysarī (d. 748/1347). All were highly influential teachers and masters of this tradition, who developed its perspectives in different directions.
- These are (1) the language of love poetry, (2) Qurʾānic and scholastic theological language, (3) Qurʾānic and Sufi theoretical language relating to the ascent through the heavenly spheres, (4) Sufi dialogues of union (between speaker and listener), and (5) Sufi and philosophical language related to the perfect/complete human being.
- Joseph Bell and Lois Giffen (Giffen 1971; Bell 1979) have collected medieval Arabic treatments of human–human love. The more recent studies of Binyamin Abrahamov and William Chittick have emphasized writings on "mystical love" (Chittick 2013; Abrahamov 2003). For an updated discussion of both kinds of literature in a later historical period, see Khaled El-Rouayheb's *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (El-Rouayheb 2005).
- Muslim litterateurs (*udabāʾ*) and religious scholars (*ʿulamāʾ*) discussed several types of union. This included physical/sensory union—the furtive glance, embrace, light kissing, the sucking of tongues, and sexual intercourse—as well as non-physical union. Like the Ḥanbalī scholar Abū ʿl-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) many held that the sensory pleasure pertaining to physical union was secondary to (less valuable than) its spiritual meaning (Bell 1979, pp. 11–45 at 32–34, 43). As for non-physical union, a common position was the one taken by the philosopher and *ḥadīth* transmitter, Aḥmad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Sarakhsī (d. 286/899), who held that the strongest union between human beings was the uniting of wills (Giffen 1971, pp. 5–8).
- "The Real" (*al-Ḥaqq*) is one of the Qurʾānic Names of God. It is often paired with "creation" (*al-khalq*). Depending on the context, it may be translated "The Truth" or "The Real-Truth". This word reveals the close connection between "ontology" and "epistemology" ("Being" and "Consciousness") in the minds of many Muslim theologians and Sufi-philosophers.
- As Sachiko Murata and William Chittick explain, "the workaday concept of God cannot do justice to a religion that uses its own idea of God as the absolute center from which everything else is judged" (Murata 1994, p. 58). The word *Allāh* in Arabic was sometimes described by theologians as a proper name, in which case it actually has no equivalent in English—just as the proper name "London" cannot be translated with the help of other descriptive words into another language.
- The terms were not restricted to God. According to this scheme, human beings also possess an essence, attributes, and acts. The essence refers to the thing in itself (e.g., God in Himself), the attributes explain what sort of thing it is (the Quran and *ḥadīth* typically describe God through His Names/Attributes), and the acts explain what the thing does. "*Dhāt*" is originally a pronoun meaning "possessor of". Thus, if theologians and Sufi thinkers understood God as *al-Dhāt* (the Essence), what they meant was that He is "possessor of" the Attributes and Acts. The Essence is simply what is named by *al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā* (the "Most Beautiful Names"), itself beyond the meanings intended by each of them separately (Murata 1994, pp. 58–78).
- For Muslim scholastics, the Names and Attributes provide a rich source of meditation on the nature of God (Murata 1994, pp. 58–78; Chittick 1989, p. 66).
- al-Wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa* (Being per se) and Nondelimited Real-True Being (*al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq al-Muṭlaq*) were expressions for "God" used by ʿAbd al-Razzāq Kāshānī and Dāwūd Qaysarī (d. 748/1347) (Qaysarī 2020, pp. 25–26; Kāshānī 1385, p. 97).
- Ibn ʿArabī often uses "The Real" in a way that is close to the current sense of "Ultimate Reality" (Chittick 1989, p. 49).
- The Muslim philosopher Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) wrote that the Necessary Being is "Real by Itself (*ḥaqq bi-nafsihi*) constantly (*dāʾiman*)", while the possible being is "real through something else" (*ḥaqq bi-ghayrihi*), which means everything besides the Necessary Being is "unreal by itself" (*bāṭil bi-nafsihi*) (Chittick 2022, p. 139 n. 1; Avicenna 2005, pp. 38–39).
- al-Wājid* (the "Finder") and *al-Mawjūd* (the "Found") are active and passive participles of *Wujūd*. What they indicated was that God is perfectly "finding" and "found" in Himself, lacking nothing, and comprehending everything. Everything is perfectly present to Him, and He cannot "lose" nor "be lost" in the way human beings can (the name "loser" [*fāqid*] being the opposite of "finder") (Gimaret 1988, pp. 133–36 (*mawjūd*), 224–26 (*wājid*); Ghazālī 2007, p. 130). Thus, to use the expression popularized by Ibn Sīnā, His "being a finder and found" is "necessary" (*wājib*) (Chittick 1989, p. 212).
- In addition to "finding" and "being", the word *wujūd* can be translated as "existence". "Finding" and "being" suggest perfection and completeness more than "existence", which suggests rather a bare or naked fact without qualities. In the nuances of this Arabic root, we observe again how "ontology" and "epistemology" are united in Ibn ʿArabī's perspective.
- As Chittick writes, "In each unique thing, the Real Being discloses a unique face of its infinite reality while remaining One and Unique in itself. We, on the other hand, remain forever ourselves in our own realities, forever other than the Real Being, while we simultaneously remain conjoined with the Real Being inasmuch as we find and are found" (Chittick 2004, pp. 27–28 n. 5).

- 39 As Chittick writes, “God’s Self-disclosure appears in two modes—ontological and cognitive, or as existence and as knowledge. . . . We need to keep in mind that *wujūd* or Being/existence means also ‘finding’. It is a subjective experience as much as an objective occurrence. God’s ‘Being’ is identical with His knowledge, that is, His self-consciousness” (Chittick 1989, p. 212).
- 40 Roy seems prepared to ground his theory of the mystical consciousness in an understanding of God as “Pure Being” (*esse*)—McGinn sometimes does as well—but both fall short of making this connection clear. Roy admits that Eckhart sometimes takes God as *esse* “on a restricted sense” and “sometimes an unrestricted sense”, which allows him to affirm the apparently contradictory propositions that “God exists” (i.e., He is a “thing”) and “God does not exist” (i.e., He is “no-thing”) (Roy 2003, pp. 72–74, 79–80, 86–87; McGinn 2008, p. 54). Nevertheless, both seem reluctant to consider Eckhart’s understanding of God (as Being, *esse*) as the ground (*grunde*) of the “divinized” soul’s awareness, or something like “Real-True Consciousness” (McGinn 2008, pp. 51, 53–55, 59; Roy 2003, p. 75). Moore, for his part, wishes to take seriously Eckhart’s position that “all things pass from their existence into their being” (S. Moore 1957, p. 318), but he does not connect “being” to “consciousness”.
- 41 McGinn admits that the mystic is somehow able to make “true judgments about the world” (McGinn 2008, p. 47), presumably about God as well. This means it is possible to inquire about the mystic’s objectivity and seek an explanation for it.
- 42 As McGinn observes, Roy was uninterested in the God of theology and was rather intent on removing from his theory of mystical consciousness any sense of an “object-like content” (McGinn 2008, p. 53). Roy states (apparently with Eckhart) that all understandings of God that take him as “the origin of creatures” are “provisional” or “limited viewpoints” and must be left behind. Rather, God must be apprehended as “no-thing” (*niht*), “neither this nor that that one can speak of” (Roy 2003, pp. 80, 89, 124–25). This position seems to invalidate the “relative truth” of every conception or imagining of God found in the writings of mystics, including Eckhart himself. For Ibn ‘Arabī, there must be an objective ground to positive thinking about God (i.e., the “God of theology”). Real-True Being/Consciousness (*al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq*) (i.e., the “God beyond theology”) is that ground.
- 43 To explain what he means that the things of the world are non-existent (*ma’dūm*), Ibn ‘Arabī sometimes resorts to the symbolism of light. God is named “Light” (*Nūr*) (Q. 24:35) because light is “luminous in itself”, and “illuminates other things”. If Real-True Being/Consciousness is Light, everything in the world is “light” (being) and “not-light” (non-existence). It is “light” (being) because it is a ray radiated from Light. It is “not light” (non-existence) because it is not *the* Light (Chittick 1989, pp. 6–8). Thus, the things of the world (in themselves, or their eternal “realities”) reside in the darkness of non-existence.
- 44 Ibn ‘Arabī claims to have coined this expression. If he did, his inspiration was at least partly Qur’ānic, since the Qur’ān often refers to God as “Outwardly Manifest” (*al-Zāhir*) and “Non-Manifest” (*al-Bāṭin*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 89–91).
- 45 What it means for a Name or Attribute to be displayed through a “property” (*ḥukm*) or “trace” (*athar*) is a subtle issue. The Names and Attributes summarize what can be known about God (e.g., that He is “Living”, or “Knowing”). The Names also establish a bridge between God and the world. This means that the names used by human beings to describe things in the world (e.g., that they are “alive” or “knowing”) have their roots in the divine order (Chittick 1989, p. 33). Since the Qur’ān affirms that God taught human beings “all of the names” (Q. 2:30), human beings display traces of the Names and Attributes as well. This is why, for instance, the virtuous traits of character (*makārim al-akhlāq*) discussed by Sufi teachers are expressed as *divine* character traits in the expression “become characterized by the character traits of God” (*takhallaqū bi-akhlāq Allāh*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 21–22). Human beings can be called “forms” of God because they display His Name “Formgiver” (*al-Muṣawwir*) and the Qur’ān relates that God formed them and made their forms beautiful (Q. 40:64).
- 46 The “reality” (*ḥaqīqa*) and “root” (*aṣl*) are part of Ibn ‘Arabī’s basic terminology. Everything in this world has a “root” in the non-manifest order (Chittick 1989, pp. 37–38). A “reality” is related to the Essence since God is the “Real” (*al-Ḥaqq*) and the “Reality of realities” (*Ḥaqīqat al-ḥaqā’iq*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 134–39). The Reality of realities thus denotes the Essence insofar as it assumes relationships with the things of the world before their creation. The created thing’s non-manifest root is its reality, which is also the “lord” that rules over it in this world. The thing that becomes manifest in this world is then the “servant” or “vassal” of its non-manifest “lord”. Ibn ‘Arabī often says that “the realities never change”, which means that the existence of things in the world veils the true situation. Existence undergoes transformation, transmutation, and corruption.
- 47 Jeffrey Kripal foretells what he believes will be a revolutionary re-orientation in how human beings study the world and the human self founded on the realization (“the flip”) that consciousness is prior, primary, and irreducible. All human activity (including every achievement of human beings) has been accomplished *within* consciousness. The history of human activity is in fact nothing but the *history of consciousness*. This is opposed to the currently dominant view that matter is primary and human beings are little islands of consciousness in a sea of matter, which neuroscientific research will eventually be able to reduce to matter as well. Kripal writes, “That new coordination, I suggest, will come as contemporary neuroscience continues to fail, spectacularly, to explain consciousness through any materialistic model or causal mechanism and a new philosophy of mind begins to appear that understands consciousness (which is not to say ego, personality, or social self) as prior and primary and so irreducible to brain function or any other material mechanism. With this irreducibility of mind will come the new ascent of the humanities, which, after all, have always been about engaging and interpreting both the most banal and the most fantastic ways that consciousness is reflected and refracted through the cultural codes of human civilization—that is, through history, social practice, language, art, religion, literature, institution, law, thought, and, I dare add, science” (Kripal 2019, pp. 13–14). The story

Kripal tells resonates with the thesis developed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in his 2003–4 Duddleian Lecture entitled “In the Beginning was Consciousness”. Nasr writes, “In traditional cosmologies Pure Consciousness, that is also Pure Being, descends, while remaining Itself transcendent vis à vis Its manifestations, through various levels of the cosmic hierarchy to reach the physical world whereas in the modern reductionist view things ascend from the primordial cosmic soup. Even if certain individual scientists believe that a conscious and intelligent Being brought about the Big Bang and originated the cosmos, consciousness plays no role in the so-called evolution of the cosmos from the early aggregate of molecules to the appearance of human beings on the planet. In the traditional world view, human beings have descended from a higher realm of being and consciousness, whereas according to the modernist perspective so prevalent in present day society, they have ascended from below. These are two diametrically opposed points of view, one based on the primacy of consciousness and the other on the primacy of unconscious and blind material agents, forces, and processes” (Nasr 2006, pp. 199–206 at 201).

48 McGinn and Roy identify at least four levels of “intentional consciousness”, although they do not clarify whether the mystical consciousness is part of this scheme or “above” it (and/or “within” it) (McGinn 2008, pp. 47–49; Roy 2003, pp. 39, 124–25). These levels point to the ways human beings “reach beyond ourselves” (Roy 2003, p. 125). Toward the end of his book, Roy tacitly admits that the consciousness that enables mystics to comport themselves correctly in this world is one “finite” determination of an “infinite consciousness” (Roy 2003, p. 128). In this, he perhaps gestures toward an ontological foundation to the mystical consciousness. For his part, Moore affirms that human beings experience more or less “intense” forms of consciousness. He writes, “One may, it seems, be more or less conscious. If we cannot look at consciousness itself, we can perhaps look at the more and less and so get an indirect line on what there is more and less of. You are more conscious now than you were in the small hours of this morning. The world has come back, as it comes back every morning. In this case, the return of consciousness is the return of the world: but there is another kind of increase in consciousness which is not a return of something that was here yesterday, of the all too familiar, but has something new about it” (S. Moore 1957, pp. 305–24 at 309). For their part, Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers tended to speak of five “objective–subjective” “worlds” of being/consciousness: (1) sensory, (2) imaginal, (3) spiritual, and (4) divine, from the most metaphorical (*majāzī*) to the most real (*ḥaqīqī*). Human beings/selves occupy all four in such a way that the “human-divine form” (5) can be said to comprise a fifth (“all-gathering”, *jāmi‘*) world (Chittick 1982b). I discuss “gathering” in Section 4 of this paper.

49 Sebastian Moore shows some awareness of the problem faced by theorists of the mystical consciousness. He writes, “The keyword... is consciousness. That word, as it is often used today, stands for an idea that I find quite fascinating—and this leads me to say what I want to do in this paper. It might have been expected that, having stated the artist’s problems, I should propose the theological solution of those problems. I’m afraid I shall not. I have a huge problem of my own as a theologian, which I suspect is analogous to the problems of the Christian artist. My problem is to wed successfully my theological knowledge and the idea of consciousness” (S. Moore 1957, p. 308).

50 As discussed above (n. 42), Roy was intent on removing from his account any sense of an “object-like content” (McGinn 2008, p. 53). For him, Eckhart’s breakthrough (*durchbruch*) to the Godhead was a movement toward an ineffable “God”. “Let us pray to God that we may be free of God” pointed to Eckhart’s desire to be liberated from the God of theology in his ascent to the ineffable “God” of “transcendent consciousness” (Roy 2003, pp. 89–90). Drawing from Robert Forman’s research on mysticism and consciousness, Roy affirms the existence of a “transcendent” self, who is no longer “conscious of” objects, but is only “conscious in” (Roy 2003, pp. xviii, xx, 32, 127–28). As the “self” begins to vanish, consciousness returns to its mysterious ground where “knowledge-by-identity” or “knowledge by acquaintance” reigns, and “knowledge about” is minimized or even abolished, including the ordinary distinctions between selves (self and other) (Forman 1999, pp. 131–32; Roy 2003, pp. 38–39). Nevertheless, Roy is forced to affirm that conventional distinctions will somehow persist. This suggests for him (see n. 48 above) that the transcendent level is one “finite” determination of “infinite consciousness” (Roy 2003, p. 128). In this—i.e., the desire to ontologize consciousness—Roy moves closer to the position laid out more self-consistently by Ibn ‘Arabī and his followers.

51 Dāwūd Qayṣarī offered a useful distinction between the “concept” (*mafhūm*) of being (*wujūd*) and its “reality” (*ḥaqīqa*). All concepts of God are related to the “mental being” (*wujūd dhiḥnī*) of the individual, which is a manifestation in the intellect (*‘aql*) of the situation as it actually is (*nafs al-amr*). Mental being, however, is still only a shadow of Being per se (*al-Wujūd min ḥaythu huwa huwa*) (Qayṣarī 2020, pp. 26, 29, 37, 51), hence the need to distinguish between “concept” and “reality”.

52 According to Ibn ‘Arabī, God may be considered in respect to “Himself” (*Dhāt*) or in respect to “His Level”. Either He is “the Essence” or He is “the Divinity” (*al-ulūha*, *al-ulūhiyya*). The name *Allāh* applies to both, although the meanings differ. When *Allāh* refers to the Essence, it indicates that nothing positive can be said about God, who is “no specific thing”. When it refers to the Divinity, it indicates that all Names/Attributes are ascribed separately to Him (Chittick 1989, pp. 47, 49, 59–62, 66).

53 If the Essence is unknowable, our knowledge of God belongs to the level of the Names/Attributes (the Divinity). In fact, we only learn about the unknowability of the Essence through Names that “negate” or “strip away” (*salb*). For instance, the “One-Only” (*Aḥad*) indicates that God is One in a way that negates the relationships He assumes with creatures (He is “transcendent”). (Chittick 2023, pp. 4, 8; 1989, pp. 9, 58, 109). By contrast, Names like “Knower”, “Seeing”, “Hearing”, and “Speaking” affirm (*ithbāt*) those relationships (He is “immanent”) (Chittick 2023, pp. 4, 10; 1989, p. 58).

- McGinn avers that mystics make “true judgments about the nature of reality” (see n. 41 above), which should include judgments about the God of theology. Unfortunately, he seems to understand this “true” judgment only as an “inverse insight” (a knowledge gained by loss). The mystical doctrine of “learned ignorance” (*docta ignorantia*) accounts for the mystic’s true judgment that God is in fact “no-thing”. The “uniting” mystic simply comes to learn the limits of his knowledge about God (McGinn 2008, pp. 53, 56). But how does McGinn explain the correctness of this judgment (its objective foundation)? He only states that it is the consequence of “the special gift of God’s love” (McGinn 2008, pp. 49–50), which is no explanation at all.
- As Michael Sells explains, when Eckhart prays to “now” be “free of God”, he does not intend to introduce a “scholastic” distinction between “God Himself” and “God in creatures”, thereby negating the “God in creatures”. In fact, he asserts that God is in creatures as well as beyond creatures. If “before”, the discussion was of the “God in creatures”, “now” it is of “God Himself”. The “God in creatures” is affirmed at one level, and negated at another level. Since the “God in creatures” rejoins “God Himself” in the negative movement, both are valid, each in its place (Sells 2011, pp. 1, 10, 188–89, 190–92).
- According to Ibn ‘Arabī, every concept and/or image of God held and professed by an individual represents a specific “knotting” or “coloration” within Being/Consciousness (Chittick 1994a, pp. 138–41; 1989, pp. 335–41). The relative truth of each “knot of belief” has its foundation in Real-True Being/Consciousness. The judgments a person has about God (his “God of beliefs”) become truer the more he advances toward Real-True Being/Consciousness. So long as consciousness remains an “individual, in-this-world, human consciousness”, even while accessing “imaginal”, “spiritual”, and “divine” consciousness, it will continue to form concepts and images about God. For a thorough treatment of this topic, see chapter 9 (“Diversity of Belief”, esp. pp. 138–41 and 152–55) in William Chittick’s *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Chittick 1994a, pp. 137–60). If Ibn ‘Arabī identifies God (the Essence) as the Real-Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*), the God of theology would include what he calls “the Real through whom Creation takes place” (*al-Ḥaqq al-makhlūq bihi*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 125, 132–34), or “the Real created in beliefs” (*al-Ḥaqq al-makhlūq fī ‘l-i’tiqādāt*) (Chittick 1994a, p. 150; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, p. IV 386.17).
- The two expressions—“relative” (*nisbī*) and “real/true” (*ḥaqīqī*)—were useful to Sa‘īd al-Dīn Farghānī (Chittick 1999, pp. 203–17 at 208–12). If the “heart” (*qalb, fu‘ād*) is understood as the place where God discloses Himself to believers, then a heart for which the description of “oneness” (*waḥdā*) has overcome that of “manyness” (*kathra*) will be receptive to a “truer” knotting of belief (see n. 68 below) (Murata 1992, pp. 311–13); for its oneness has become “true/real” (*ḥaqīqī*) and its manyness “relative” (*nisbī*). As for “nondelimitation in beliefs”, Ibn ‘Arabī writes, “If God were to take people to account for error, He would take every possessor of belief to account. Every believer has delimited his lord with his intellect (*‘aql*) and consideration (*naẓar*) and has thereby restricted Him (*qayyadahu wa ḥaṣarahu*). But nothing is worthy for God except Nondelimitation (*wa lā yanbaghī li-Llāh illā ‘l-iṭlāq*)” (Chittick 1994a, p. 153; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, p. III 309.30).
- On these correlative terms, see Chittick’s *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Chittick 1989, pp. 16, 19, 43, 49, 61, 89, 91, 96, 132–33, 164, 173, 196, 214, 216).
- Ibn ‘Arabī frequently reminds his readers that “the Self-disclosures are never repeated” (*lā takrār fī ‘l-tajallī*). He identifies the Essence as the ultimate source of transformation, transmutation, and corruption in this world. As the Qur’ān declares, “Every day He is upon some task (*sha’n*)” (Q. 55:29). Here, “He” refers to the Essence, and “Day” refers to the present moment, the ever-recurring temporal locus of a new Self-disclosure (Chittick 1989, pp. 18, 96, 103).
- This is related to the comprehensive and multi-dimensional way in which human beings display the Names/Attributes.
- On the distinction between “animal human beings” and “perfect human beings”, see Chittick and Murata (Chittick 1994a, pp. 23, 36, 38, 155; Murata 1992, p. 305). Ibn ‘Arabī makes the point, *pace* the Muslim philosopher Ibn Sīnā, that the human being is not defined by his rationality (the Aristotelean “rational animal”, *ḥayawān nāṭiq* in Arabic), but rather “by the divine form” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1911, p. III 154.19). Qūnawī also explains that “animal men (*al-unāsī al-ḥayawāniyyūn*) are the forms of... that human-divine reality in respect of outward manifestation” (Chittick 1992, p. 189). Perfect human beings, on the other hand, actualize the human–divine reality at all levels (outward and inward, visible and hidden).
- Ibn ‘Arabī discusses this complex topic in his remarks on the meaning of “Adam”. This name refers both to the first prophet/first perfect human being and to the inner reality of every human being (its potential to actualize the human-divine form). Ibn ‘Arabī describes Adam as an “all-gathering created entity” (*al-kawn al-jāmī‘*). This means that he possesses a “form” (*ṣūra*) in this lower world whose “meaning” (*ma’nā*) is *Allāh* in the higher world. Since *Allāh* is the all-gathering name (*al-ism al-jāmī‘*), “Adam and his children” are the only loci of manifestation in this world that comprehensively display (potentially or actually) the meanings of all the Names/Attributes in a proper balance (Chittick 1982a, pp. 30–93 at 37–38, 45; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1966, p. 48; 1980, p. 50).
- Kāshānī writes, “The Reality of realities is the One-Only Essence (*al-dhāt al-aḥadiyya*) that gathers together all realities. It is called the Presence of Gathering (*ḥaḍrat al-jam‘*) and the Presence of Being (*ḥaḍrat al-wujūd*)” (Chittick 2023, p. 5 n. 7).
- The “Hidden Treasure” is an allusion to the infinite relationships or “regards” that the Essence assumes with the possible things. These relationships are summarized by the Names and Attributes. “Hidden Treasure” comes from a saying that Sufis attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad. According this Prophetic *ḥadīth* in which God speaks in the first person, “I was a Hidden Treasure, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures that I might be known.” (‘Irāqī 1982, p. 10; Chittick 1989, p. 391 n. 14).

- 65 “One-Onliness” (*aḥadiyya*) points to the “transcendence” of the Essence, since it negates all “regards” or possible relationships with things, whereas “One-Allness” (*wāḥidiyya*) points to the “immanence” of the Essence, and affirms every possible relationship with things (Chittick 2023, pp. 8, 11–12; ‘Irāqī 1982, p. 10). The word “thing” (*shayʿ*, *ashyāʿ*) in Islamic/Arabic philosophical discourses—one of the “indefinites” (*min ankar al-nakirāt*)—is applicable to anything but God (Chittick 1989, pp. 12, 88).
- 66 For Ibn ‘Arabī, cosmic existence as a whole represents a differentiated (*mufaṣṣal*) locus of manifestation of all of the Names and Attributes, while human beings, living within cosmic existence, each represents a summated (*mujmal*) locus of manifestation of all the Names and Attributes (Chittick 1982a, pp. 37–38).
- 67 As Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes, “In the beginning” refers both to the distant past as well as the present moment, which is an “eternal now” (Nasr 2006, p. 199). In a similar way, Sebastian Moore writes, “In the beginning was the Word, the word wholly meaningful, wholly within silence. This is true now. It means ‘this is not the starting point’. How much of our lives is based on the opposite assumption, that ‘in the beginning was the [mundane] situation’” (S. Moore 1957, p. 319).
- 68 In general, “gathering” signifies a coordination of manyness through the achievement of an overpowering oneness. Dispersion, by contrast, signifies the domination of oneness by a differentiating manyness. In gathering, the description of oneness becomes true/real (*ḥaqīqī*), dominating over the description of manyness, which thus becomes relative (*nisbī*) (see n. 57 above).
- 69 Sufi theorists explained in their teachings that human beings can only aspire to a “mystical consciousness” because Being/Consciousness had first descended and “condescended to” the human being/consciousness.
- 70 The words “voyage” (*sayr*) and “journey” (*saḥar*) were near synonyms in discussions about “wayfaring” (*sulūk*). Ibn ‘Arabī seems to have limited the journeys to three (Aboueize 2007, pp. 185–95 at 187). His early followers added a fourth. See William Chittick’s “Farghānī and *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* and the Four Journeys” (Chittick Forthcoming).
- 71 A number of Sufi theorists located “gathering” (*jamʿ*) among the final stations of being/consciousness’s voyage of ascent. ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1088), in his description of the one hundred stations of the voyagers, placed “gathering” at the 99th station, while calling it “the furthest station of the wayfarers” (*ghāyat maqāmāt al-sālikīn*). (Anṣārī al-Harawī 1966, p. 46). Saʿīd al-Dīn Farghānī and other followers of Ibn ‘Arabī named the stations achieved at the end of the third and fourth journeys the “gathering of gathering” (*jamʿ al-jamʿ*) and “one-onliness of gathering” (*aḥadiyyat al-jamʿ*). For an extensive discussion of “gathering”, see Chittick’s “Farghānī and *Waḥdat al-Wujūd* and the Four Journeys” (Chittick Forthcoming). For a summary, see his commentary on “Flash VI” of the *Divine Flashes* (*Lamaʿāt*) of ‘Irāqī (‘Irāqī 1982, pp. 137–38).
- 72 According to Farghānī, the wayfarer begins to witness Divine Self-disclosures at the beginning of the first journey, which is partly what defines it as a journey in the first place. At this early stage, the mystical consciousness has begun to emerge, as Farghānī explains in his commentary on the first line of the *Poem of the Wayfaring* (*Naẓm al-sulūk*) by Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1234): “My eye’s hand poured me the strong wine of love, my cup her/Her face, majestic beyond beauty”. According to Farghānī, this line describes the wayfarer’s witnessing of the Divine Self-disclosure in the locus of manifestation of a beautiful human face, which is classified as a Self-disclosure pertaining to the Divine Act (*fiʿl*) (Farghānī 2007, pp. 147, 149–50).
- 73 This is the *docta ignorantia*, or the learned ignorance described by Eckhart (McGinn 2008, pp. 53, 56–57; Roy 2003, pp. 75–79).
- 74 Among the three theorists, Louis Roy was most preoccupied with self-negation. He insists that God must be found as “no-thing” within the nothingness of the empty self, “whenever the operations of its faculties are interrupted” (Roy 2003, p. 80). It was perhaps Roy’s interest in dialogue with Zen Buddhism that caused him to be so preoccupied with “emptiness”. McGinn and Moore are less concerned with the “emptiness” of unbecoming, though they too acknowledge the self-negation involved in apophysis. McGinn affirms the teachings of at least two mystics—John of the Cross and Eckhart—whereby the “inner faculties must be emptied and put to rest so that God can work directly within them” (McGinn 2008, p. 58). Moore follows Aldous Huxley in claiming that “education should be addressed primarily to ‘the not self’: when harmony has been established with this massive silent partner, the powers of the self are quickened in an amazing way” (S. Moore 1957, p. 306). He writes further, “In realizing ‘not-this’, I have stepped back from being thus filled with things, from ‘this’” (S. Moore 1957, p. 319).
- 75 McGinn and Moore give greater credence to the “self-realization” of the “divinized soul”. For McGinn, every intentional act of the mystic is somehow intertwined with the divine presence (the “God-self” of Teresa, Eckhart, and Ignatius) (McGinn 2008, pp. 47, 50–51, 53). Moore writes, “Consciousness... has no object, it is simply the delight and strength of self-hood... I mean, that the process of becoming more conscious is going somewhere... towards a completeness of itself” (S. Moore 1957, p. 311).
- 76 If “*Allāh*” names the Essence, it is because (like every proper noun) it does not specify an attribute. In this way, it is like (for instance) the name “Boston”, which does not point to a meaning that would identify every town named “Boston”. *Dhāt* is a “pronoun of allusion”, which means the Essence is just that which is alluded to by every Name/Attribute or Act.
- 77 As Qūnawī explains, when Being/Consciousness descended the levels, it gradually left the world of luminosity (*nūrāniyya*) and simpleness (*basāṭa*), entering into darkness (*ẓulmāniyya*) and compositeness (*tarkīb*). The return voyage of being/consciousness must, therefore, be an ascent of “unbecoming” or “decomposition” (*miʿrāj al-taḥlīl*). The wayfarer on this voyage obeys the Command to “deliver the trusts back to their owners” (Q. 4:58). He “discards” (for instance) the “elemental” part he acquired on the descent back to the world of elements. Nevertheless, the return voyage must also comprise an aspect of composition (*tarkīb*), since the wayfarer continues to have an “elemental existence” while he lives (Chittick 1992, pp. 194–95).

- 78 These complementary terms were often discussed by Sufi theorists. Stability/ableness tended to be seen as a higher station, although Ibn ‘Arabī reverses the hierarchy, noting that coloration/variegation corresponds to the actual situation. God, in His Self-disclosure, constantly transforms Himself in/through the forms of the world (Chittick 1989, p. 108).
- 79 As Sufi theorists often insist, any perception, tasting (*dhawq*), or witnessing (*shuhūd*) of a Divine Self-disclosure, however magnificent or sublime, is not an encounter with the Real-Truth Itself. The early Sufi of Baghdad Junayd (d. 298/910) said, “the water takes on the color of the cup.” This means the witnessing of the wayfarer is only in accordance with his preparedness (*isti‘ādā*) (Chittick 2020, pp. 134–56 at 141–42). Understanding this point will help to prevent the voyager from placing too much value in experiences. The writings of Sufi theorists are in general agreement with the current consensus that “it is fundamentally misconceived to think of the mystical life as based upon the cultivation and interpretation of special episodes or states of consciousness, whether or not different in kind from other types of experience” (P. Moore 2005, p. 6356).
- 80 Unlike the Essence and the Names/Attributes, the Acts/acts are synonymous with the ambiguous domain of existent things. They represent the “creatures” of this world, which are Self-disclosures of God or manifestations of the Essence. In themselves, the creatures are non-existent (see n. 43 above) (Chittick 1989, pp. 11–12), but in the cosmos, their situation is ambiguous.
- 81 See n. 46 above.
- 82 The terms “property” and “trace” help to explain how a Name or Attribute is displayed in cosmic existence. The word “property” (*ḥukm*) stresses the authority that the Name/Attribute has in exercising influence over the states of a given locus of manifestation. The “trace” or “property” really belongs to—is “proper to”—the Name or Attribute from which it became established in cosmic existence (Chittick 1989, pp. 39–41). For instance, the “creature” displays the ruling authority of “Creator”.
- 83 Incomparability (*tanzīh*) and Similarity (*tashbīh*) name the two ways of gaining knowledge of God. Attributes that affirm God’s similarity to creatures (*tashbīh*)—e.g., “speech”, “sight”, “knowledge”—suggest that traces of those Attributes are displayed in cosmic existence and thus give news that God is “Outwardly Manifest” (*Zāhir*) (Chittick 1989, pp. 68–70). See also n. 53 above.
- 84 Qūnawī explained these stages of gathering in more explicitly Neoplatonic terms. As he describes, when the voyager’s being/consciousness becomes dominated by one of the Names/Attributes, it moves away from “centrality” or “middleness” (*wasatīyya*, *markazīyya*). This voyager’s wayfaring will then be characterized by dispersion over gathering, by coloration over ableness, and by disequilibrium (*inḥirāf*) over equilibrium (*i’tidāl*). By achieving “middleness”—the center point of the circle—the voyager gains the desired equilibrium (*i’tidāl*) and stability/ableness (Chittick 1992, pp. 189–90).
- 85 As the Qur’ān affirms, “He is with you (*ma‘akum*) wheresoever you are” (Q. 57:4). In connection with this verse, Abū Ḥamid Ghazālī (d. 555/1111) describes four levels of “those who affirm oneness (*tawḥīd*)”. Only the fourth and highest group of “unifiers” witnesses that “there is no more than one actor” (Chittick 2020, pp. 139–40). So long as he sees two in his own acts—God and himself—the unifier lacks perfect togetherness. He remains fixed in dispersion.
- 86 Farḡhānī discusses seven interiors in his explanation of the four journeys. His vision is based on traditional reports describing seven interiors of the Qur’ān or seven universal Names/Attributes of God. These correspond to the seven “root attributes” of the wayfarer (i.e., life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, hearing, seeing). Moreover, the differentiated structure of the self suggests that attributes like life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, etc., possess multiple interiors beyond the “ordinary” life, knowledge, desire, power, speech, etc., that most human beings know (Chittick Forthcoming).
- 87 This is a famous *ḥadīth* which Ibn ‘Arabī cites and discusses from many points of view (Chittick 1989, pp. 344–46).
- 88 For Ibn ‘Arabī, the Name Lord (*rabb*) denotes the relationship the Essence assumes with creatures (n. 46 above). It alludes to the “root” of every created thing, which is the reality that lords over it in this world (Chittick 2023, p. 14). Most human beings do not open the doors to this reality, and thereby fail to recognize the Essence as their lord (Chittick 1989, pp. 310–12).
- 89 It is only possible to speak of “interiors” of the human being/self because human beings are “outer forms” (*ṣuwar*) whose “inner meaning” (*ma‘nā*) is named by *Allāh* (the Essence). See n. 45 above.
- 90 Farḡhānī explains that the self’s recognition of itself on the ascending arc of the voyage is a recognition of its essence (*dhāt*) gained from its essence, its innermost reality, or highest level. This innermost interior of the self is identified with the One-Only Essence (*Dhāt*), which is this “all-gathering” self’s Lord (Chittick Forthcoming). See also n. 46, n. 71, and n. 89 above.
- 91 The Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) cites the mixture of water (*mā’*) and milk (*laban*) as a suitable comparison for the kind of “divine–human” unification (*ittiḥād*) he observed in the doctrines of certain heretical groups (Muslim and non-Muslim) (e.g., Jacobite Christians). In this union, two realities appear to share the same existence (*wujūd*) (in this case, through the mixing of two substances), or their essences become confused (e.g., water becomes wine or milk). The heretical view Ibn Taymiyya attributes to Ibn ‘Arabī and some of his followers is that God and human beings (two things of differing reality) are joined together by a single existence (*wujūd*) (Ibn Taymiyya 1974, p. 24; Knysh 1999, pp. 98, 100–105).
- 92 Ibn Taymiyya distinguished between those who professed “unification” (*ittiḥād*) or “incarnation” (*ḥulūl*) in one specific created being (e.g., the Prophet Jesus), and those who professed it more generally. He saw the establishment of water (*mā’*) in a container (*inā’*) as a suitable comparison for the doctrine held by Nestorian Christians (Ibn Taymiyya 1974, p. 24).
- 93 The completion of the circle is often associated by members of the School of Ibn ‘Arabī with the station of the Prophet Muḥammad. Farḡhānī refers to the station achieved by Muḥammad as “most-perfectness” (*akmalīyya*), whereas the limit of other extraordinary

human beings is only perfection/completeness (*kamāl*) (Chittick 2023, p. 11). ‘Irāqī describes the station of most perfect human beings by the expression “two arcs’ lengths”, while that of Muḥammad is “or nearer”. These names come from the Qur’ānic description of the Prophet Muḥammad’s nocturnal ascent (*mi‘rāj*) related in Q. 53:8–9 (“then drew near and suspended hung, two arcs’ length away, or nearer”) (‘Irāqī 1982, pp. 98, 137–38, 141–42, 147–48, 154, 160).

See n. 46, n. 71, n. 89, n. 91 above on servant (*‘abd*) and lord (*rabb*). To be the perfect servant (*‘abd kāmīl*) is to be the servant of the Essence. It is to achieve the gatheringness of the Prophet Muḥammad whose Lord is the Essence (Chittick 2023, pp. 11–18). For Sufi theorists, this is only a theoretical possibility, since only Muḥammad has achieved this station.

These two terms—*ḥādīth* and *qadīm*—were used by Muslim philosophers and theologians in discussions about the temporal origination or eternity of the world. Here, they are better translated as “recently arrived” and “timeless”.

‘Irāqī explains poetically how “union” was the case all along: “a sun shining through a thousand bits of glass; a ray of color through each one, beaming to plain sight. All of it one light, but a thousandfold in colors, so that difference appears between this one and that one.” This difference, however, is imagined (*mutawahham*). (‘Irāqī 1982, p. 94; 1974, p. 23).

See n. 24 and n. 75 above. On the one hand, McGinn wishes to explain the teaching that the “inner faculties” must be silenced for God to work within (McGinn 2008, p. 58). He also wishes to accommodate the view of St. John of the Cross that those very same faculties are transformed by grace (McGinn 2008, pp. 57–59), and to affirm the “God-self” of Teresa, Eckhart, and Ignatius (McGinn 2008, pp. 47, 50–51, 53). I do not see how McGinn can self-consistently explain this situation without an “ontology of consciousness”—i.e., a theory explaining how the ordinary consciousness becomes integrated within (coordinated and harmonized by) the mystical consciousness, the expanded “self” now identifying with the higher level without this abolishing the lower. An ontology of consciousness explains how the two are united so long as the mystic is alive.

See n. 24, n. 75, and n. 76 above. Roy wishes to explain Eckhart’s teaching that “the faculties no longer operate”. He takes this to mean that the faculties are drawn “in to a unity”, sinking “into an oblivion”, with some, like memory and the senses, even becoming “inactive” (Roy 2003, pp. 75–77, 80). For Roy, the self must pass into “unawareness” for another set of operations to become active in the ground (*grunde*). I do not see how Roy can explain this situation without positing a more gathered consciousness into which the dispersed consciousness becomes integrated, the self now operating from the gathered level.

An Ibn ‘Arabīan theory of the “mystical consciousness” will distinguish between “metaphorical” and “Real-True” consciousness. This distinction helps to explain the various “colorations” and “stabilities” achieved by the voyager in his ascent (*mi‘rāj*). When the attributes of the metaphorical self/consciousness are annihilated (*fānī*), they are not lost in subsistence (*baqā*). Rather, they are seen for what they are—loci of manifestation in which the Names and Attributes display themselves. The consciousness of the dispersed self has been integrated into and coordinated by the expanded consciousness of the more gathered self. At this higher level, the “timeless” Names/Attributes of Real-True Being/Consciousness have “subjugated” the “newly arrived” attributes belonging to the individual human being/consciousness.

See n. 94 above. ‘Irāqī’s point confirms the views of Nasr and Moore cited above (see n. 67). Followers of Ibn ‘Arabī described all of Being/Consciousness as “a single circle divided by a line into two bow-shaped arcs” (‘Irāqī 1982, p. 98; Chittick 1992, pp. 185–88). As ‘Irāqī explains, the line appears to exist (*mī namāyad kih hast*) from the vantage point of ordinary human consciousness, situated at the lower quadrant of the “rising” or “returning” arc (*qaws-i ṣu‘ūdī/‘urūjī*). There, it is like the line dividing light and shadow (*nūr wa ḡulm*). At the moment of “meeting”, this fine line vanishes, and the knower suddenly understands that the “timeless” and the “newly arrived” have never been separate. The line was only imagined (*mutawahham*) to exist (‘Irāqī 1982, p. 98; 1974, p. 27). Still, though the “eternal” and the “temporal” have now collapsed into the “eternal moment”, and the wayfarer has overcome his metaphorical consciousness, he has not abandoned consciousness at the lower level. He only sees this level for what it is. Hence, Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī remarks, “But wait! Even if the line is erased, the circle will still not appear as it did at first. The line’s effect (*athar*) will remain” (‘Irāqī 1982, p. 98; 1974, p. 27).

As Qūnawī explains, although being/consciousness left the world of luminosity (*nūrāniyya*) and noncompositeness (*basāṭiyya*) and entered into darkness (*ḡulmāniyya*) and composition (*tarkīb*) in its descent, the voyager’s return to simpleness, or his ascent of decomposition (*mi‘rāj al-taḥlīl*), also represents, in another sense, a voyage of “supra-formal composition” (*tarkīb ma‘nawī*), since he never leaves the lower level, even as he returns the parts he acquired “back to their owners” (Chittick 1992, p. 195).

Peter Moore makes this one of the four requirements for any modern treatment of mysticism. He writes, “Any modern treatment of mysticism must satisfy two negative and two positive criteria. First, it must avoid reifying mysticism into some kind of uniform system or tradition standing outside the historical traditions of religion. Second, it must avoid making the forms or truths of the mysticism of any one tradition a touchstone for the evaluation of mysticism more generally. Third, it must take into account the global diversity of mysticism; it must embrace Nagarjuna as well as Teresa of Ávila, Isaac Luria as well as Shankara, Mirabai as well as Plotinus. Finally, it must take into account what may be called the four “dimensions” of mysticism: the experiential, the theoretical, the practical, and the social” (P. Moore 2005, p. 6356).

I borrow this expression from José Cabezon who explains how the academic study of religion has advanced by incorporating the perspectives of the subjects it first studies as objects. He writes, “. . . we are a long way from achieving theory parity. For example, it is hard for us even to conceive of the day when a “Theories of Religion” course might be taught with a substantial selection of

readings from nonwestern sources, to take an example of something that some of us consider a sign of maturity in this regard. Still, there does seem to be movement in the direction of theory-pluralism, even if the limited experiments that we have engaged in are still dominated by a predominantly western agenda" (Cabezón 2006, pp. 21–38 at 31).

The construction of typologies (e.g., a mysticism of "uniting" and one of "identity") is useful, as this paper has shown, but it risks becoming superficial and overly rigid. The 1996 study of McGinn, Idel, and colleagues revealed that the classifications of an earlier generation of scholars were, in fact, too rigid. McGinn writes, "Rather than being easily classifiable by opposed types, most mystical texts feature an oscillation and interaction between two poles that need not be seen as expressing opposition" (McGinn 2005, p. 6335). A dialogical approach to mysticism is likely to challenge the rigidity of other classifications suggested by the following distinctions—e.g., dualist/non-dualist, theistic/non-theistic, and voluntaristic/gnostic forms of mysticism.

What I mean here, to leverage the insights of the comparative study of religion, is that scholarship operating principally from within the linguistic frame of a particular tradition and engaging in scholarly dialogue with others through "translation", is less likely to fall prey to the charge of misrepresentation or distortion than an approach that makes comparison its primary *modus operandi*. This is because comparison proceeds by "magical" leaps involving "the 'manipulation of differences' across large gaps..." in order to observe and document similarities (Patton and Ray 2000b, pp. 1–19 at 3–4). The potential ill-effects of such an approach to cross-cultural dialogue have now been well-documented (Patton and Ray 2000a).

As Chittick explains, a good deal of Sufi literature explains how to discern between the sorts of ambiguous experiences—trances, visions, premonitions—connected only to the "imaginal" world from the more significant perceptions connected to the higher worlds. The disciplines of the Sufi path help wayfarers attune their understanding so that they can discern true from false (Chittick 2020, pp. 150–52). The study of "mystical practices", including "contemplative discernment", will surely enrich the hoped for dialogue between traditions. This topic has tended to receive less attention in academic studies of mysticism than the more exciting discussions about "experience", or the more specialized discussions of "doctrines" (P. Moore 2005, p. 6357).

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Article

De-Mystifying Mysticism: A Critical Realist Perspective on Ambivalences in the Study of Mysticism

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Abstract: The study of mysticism has been at an impasse for many years, wavering between naïve realism around a common core hypothesis and critical questioning of the category of mysticism and its imposition. In this article, we review key 20th century developments in the study of mysticism to understand why the term was largely abandoned and unpack the contours of this impasse. Specifically, we probe the literature to ask (i) how has mysticism been defined and (ii) who counts as a mystic? Our primary data are key pieces of scholarly literature on mysticism, including interdisciplinary studies and disciplinary literature from religious studies, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. This review draws on a metatheoretic perspective of critical realism and is not meant to be comprehensive but rather analytical, seeking to identify patterns in scholarship. We find that each question is answered by studies along an axis, wavering between two ideal-typical poles. On the first question, we find scholarship ranging along an *axis of essence* between extreme poles of a reified vs. relativized substance of mysticism. On the second question, we find studies on an *axis of access*, varying between a rarified concept of mystical elites and a laified concept of mystical knowledge open to all. Putting studies along these axes yields a definitional space of mysticism that is compatible with critical realism and allows for the general study of mysticism to continue in a more nuanced, post-critique way. We also find that the category of *experience* lies at the origin or intersection point of both axes, and is a source of many problems in the general study of mysticism.

Keywords: mysticism; critical realism; mystical consciousness; mysticism and culture; literature review

1. Introduction: The Mystic Impasse

The modern study of mysticism was long dominated by an outlook of naïve realism, exemplified by perennialist thinkers searching for the common essence across all traditions of who mystics are and what they experience. As is now well documented, Christian scholars adapted the terminology of early Greek mystery cults and this quickly spread to scholarship in the major religious traditions of the world. By the 17th century, *mysticism* became a noun and modern scholars then spent countless volumes identifying mystery as the experiential essence at the core of all religions. However, by the mid-20th century, historical and theological studies of mysticism moved to a wide-ranging critique of this essentialist search. Critical theorists used historical analysis to situate “mysticism” as a category in the history of ideas and traced how it came to acquire the contours it does today. Above all, they critiqued the tradition of Western Christendom for imposing parochial definitions onto Other cultures, thereby violently classifying phenomena by their own lenses and abandoning other phenomena that just do not fit their own definitions.

Since then, scholarship has wavered between these two extremes, resulting in a definitional impasse that characterizes the field. Any research on mysticism walks the gauntlet of definitions and assumptions. Most have just abandoned the term, while others seek new mysticisms in an expanded notion of vaguely specified, contemporary “spiritual” phenomena, overlapping in some undetermined fashion with “esoteric”, “gnostic”, “new spiritual”, “non-ordinary”, and other such categories that are hard to pin down. At the same time, religious studies has made a turn to the body and materiality that, while a welcome correction to doctrinal emphasis, is typically at the cost of spirit (McDaniel 2018). By contrast, theology seems to have largely retreated from the subject matter into practical areas like finance and management or pastoral care and psychology. All in all, the end of the millennium might well be said to have brought an impasse in the field of mysticism studies. Barring some outstanding but highly focused exceptions, the study of mysticism largely dropped off.

However, critical theory’s constructivism has not been able to stem the continued uptick of interest in mysticism and mystics. In Western Christendom (loosely), de-institutionalization of religious affiliation has come along with growing interest in spirituality (Parsons 2020). Furthermore, it is relatively easy to show that in other historical and cultural contexts, related phenomena continue to exist and many are more archaic than Christianity. These include Ancient Egyptian sacred religion, Vedanta, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Daoism, and others (Schmidt-Leukel 2013). Long before the term *mystikos* entered Eleusinian mystery cults, the Bhagavat Gita, first transmitted orally and then composed as a scripture, was concerned with how Atman can achieve union with the creator deity Brahma, overcoming the illusionary perception of a separate existence (Wilke 2021b). Prior to Christianity, fully enlightened beings (Bodhisattvas) alleviated human suffering and worked for the benefit of others on the path to Enlightenment (Gethin 1998, p. 231). Abrahamic and other religious traditions have developed their own schools and techniques with many variations within each tradition. Increasingly, research has attested to interesting similarities across traditions and mystics, e.g., in mystic paths (Ebstein 2013; Knysh 2000; Zarrabi-Zadeh 2015), contemplative practices (Ware 1985), notions of deification (Arblaster and Faesen 2018; Gavrilyuk 2009), or concepts of unity and personhood (Izutsu 2013, 2016). Indeed, denying mystical credentials to these traditions might do more violence than assuming similarities.

In any case, there is an obvious need to review where we are with the study of mysticism and see whether it is possible to go further, for which a review of the major scholarship in the field is called for. To that end, in this article we explore how others have approached mysticism such that it has led to this impasse and for the term to be virtually abandoned. The challenges boil down to two questions: what is mysticism, and who counts as a mystic? These are the two motivating questions driving our analytical review. In this theory paper, we review the key literature in or translated into English to identify how scholarship has tended to answer these questions and to analytically categorize those responses. Our argument does not enter the challenging study of psychospirituality, esotericism, and the like, all of which are being ably served by their own, correctly distinct reviews (Hammer 2020; Hanegraaff 2013; Parsons 2020).

We approach the questions from the perspective of critical realism, broadly rooted in the philosophical movement initiated by Roy Bhaskar, particularly in its early stages, or “original” critical realism. As discussed below, this allows us to move past the search for final, essentialist definitions of the category of mysticism. This critical realist approach allows us to study scholarship on mysticism from a perspective of epistemological relativism, where more than one type of study is important to outline the phenomenon as a whole. As such, we review key studies on mysticism from the social sciences and humanities.

What we find with this lens is that each question—what mysticism is and who counts as a mystic—is answered by studies along an axis, defined at an extreme by an ideal typical pole. In the first case, we find the ideal types of reification and relativization as extreme ways to define mysticism, and in the second we find the ideal types of rarification and laification as two poles naming who can count as a mystic. At the center, or origin, of these axes is the problematic category of “experience”, which seems to have dominated comparative studies on mysticism since James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we discuss our methodological premises and the key, metatheoretic features of critical realism that we employ here as an explanatory framework. We also describe our criteria for selecting the literature. In the subsequent two sections, we detail our main findings, namely unpacking how studies have tended to (1) define mysticism by way of essences, and (2) identify who counts as a mystic by defining access to this category. We cite examples of studies in our description not to prove our analysis but to illustrate our findings. That means that this is not intended to be a comprehensive review of mysticism studies, if such an exercise were even possible. Rather, we are after analytical patterns to organize the study of mysticism and so understand better the impasse in the field. In the final section, we discuss how a critical realist perspective allows us to make non-essentialist sense of these poles, i.e., more by way of ambivalences in a definitional space than as a single point, bypassing the necessity to resolve them. Finally, we problematize the category of “experience” and suggest reviving the category of “mystical consciousness” that embraces the experiential component of mysticism but also many more other important aspects of this phenomenon. This paper concludes with thoughts on how to use this as a basis to develop a theory of mysticism.

2. Approaching the 20th Century Study of Mysticism from a Critical Realist Perspective

In this article, our primary data are the scholarly literature on mysticism. We follow a traditional, qualitative approach to literature reviews, synthesizing what has been written on the subject so far, identifying any trends or patterns in the existing research, aggregating empirical findings to our research angle, generating new frameworks and theories, and underlining topics and questions requiring more investigation (Paré et al. 2015). Our point of departure is the turn of the 20th century, i.e., the emergence of the academic studies of mysticism, usually associated with William James, the American psychologist and philosopher whose 1901–1902 Gifford Lectures on *Varieties of Religious Experience* set the stage for modern studies of mysticism. Of course, James is especially relevant for the Anglophone literature on the topic. In this article we review only texts in or translated into English. Further research will be needed to find out whether the same analytical patterns hold in other literature.

We then trace development of the academic study of mysticism throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century. Our focus has been on the survey of interdisciplinary and disciplinary research on mysticism, including key, highly referenced texts in philosophy, psychology, sociology, religious studies, specialized studies (e.g., Sufi studies), anthropology, theology, and history. We have given more consideration to works that have been central to the topic and defined trends, patterns and divisions (like Stace, Hood, Katz). We have also drawn on recent summative texts, analyzing the state of art and discussions in the academic study of mysticism in the last century (Parsons 2020; Stoeber 1992; Wilke 2021a). Critical (historical) research on mysticism was used both as data (often representing a constructionist approach to mysticism) and as the lens to contextualize and critique the earlier research on mysticism. We placed the unfolding discussions in a historical context

of modernity and shifting scientific paradigms to make sense of them in their academic context, and to assess how they can be used to reconfigure the field today.

Our metatheoretic perspective is rooted in critical realism, a philosophical approach that falls between empiricist positivism and radical constructivism. As such, it seems tailor-made to address the definitional impasse between perennialist naivete of the “hard” common-core variety and perennial skepticism of the “hard” constructivists regarding the definition of mysticism. The approach stems from the work of late philosopher, Roy Bhaskar on reformulating realism in the natural (Bhaskar 1975) and social sciences (Bhaskar 1979). We employ his early phase, known popularly as Basic Critical Realism (CR), not his later Dialectical Critical Realism or the more complex Philosophy of MetaReality, which subsumes the earlier two phases (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2016). The last is, in fact, arguably the most rigorous basis for theorizing mysticism scientifically, but that work remains to be done and it is not especially helpful in classifying the existing literature as we seek to do here. Moreover, it diverges from other formulations of CR, and so tends to be distracting for this review. Basic, or original critical realism not only offers an excellent perspective for our exercise but it is also similar to other formulations of critical realism, such as that of John Hick (1989).

The starting point for CR—and for Hick’s version of critical realism—is a fundamental level of comfort with polythetic or “fuzzy” definitions. That is, CR is not necessarily seeking fixed and hard definitions containing the *essence* of a phenomenon, but is perfectly compatible with polyvalent cluster-concepts akin to Wittgenstein’s well-known “family resemblances”. In this perspective—which has been ably applied to the category religion in general by Hick (Schmidt-Leukel 2023)—not all versions of “mysticism” must instantiate all features spread over the whole class, and no single feature need be “essential” to the definition for all time to come, nor may application of a feature be the same or to the same degree in all cases. Indeed, many philosophers argue in general that not every category need have an essence that is necessary and sufficient for it to be accurate or useful. The anti-essentialist approach argues that for a case to count as a member of a set, it need only have *enough* of a number of characteristics, or then qualitatively *enough* of a fixed number of characteristics. Moreover, which characteristics are fulfilled in which “gray” zones and to what extent may also change over time, and yet the category is still useful. Classification in mathematics and biology are good examples (Schilbrack 2013, 2018). Which means that, mysticism (like religion or, indeed, other categories like politics, society, or even human rights) need not have an essential and unchanging core in order to be considered a useful category. Distinctions between different types of mystical experiences would also be fuzzy, so that all could still fall under a polyvalent or polythetic concept of “mysticism”. Similar, non-essentialist methods have proven useful in, for example, fluid approaches to property-clusters when defining “esotericism” (Engler and Gardiner 2023), or in defining Hindu “yogis” (Hatley 2013), or homeomorphic equivalents in two contiguous cultures when defining “human rights” (Panikkar 1982). What is crucial is not an essential and static feature but rather a set of characteristics in one instance that may more or less resemble those in another. In other words, close enough is good enough.

Non-essentialist definitions become a premise for the first feature of CR, namely *ontological realism*. Bhaskar’s view asserts that the world exists independently of our knowledge or perception (or definition) of it. The social world is particularly complicated because people’s perceptions change their reality (which is not as true in the natural world). This ontological realist view is far from being naïvely realist, in part because CR holds that ontology is stratified into three layers: the *real* (underlying, relational structures mechanisms), the *actual* (events that occur), and the *empirical* (observations). Reducing all reality simply to what we experience or observe is part of the common *epistemic fallacy*,

by which what exists is reduced to what we (can) know. Science, including the study of mysticism, is a process of observing the empirical, deducing the actual, and theorizing the real.

Which leads to the second, key feature of CR, *epistemological relativism*. This principle acknowledges that our knowledge of the world (not the world itself) is always mediated by our conceptual frameworks, theories, and social contexts. Our epistemology is fundamentally fallible and so our knowledge of the natural or social worlds is never complete. This is partly because these systems are inherently open and partly because our knowledge is based on observation that is, itself, theory-laden. Over time, and with concerted effort, we can gradually build up a fuller, theoretical account of some aspect of reality. And some phenomena are both natural and social, calling for multiple methods.

Third, CR's principle of *judgmental rationality* refers to the human capacity to make reasoned judgments about competing knowledge claims. These judgements involve using criteria to critically evaluate and compare competing knowledge claims, such as consistency with facts and internal coherence. Following Karl Popper, Bhaskar suggests that we may not be able to prove a theory is true, but we can demonstrate it is untrue under certain circumstances (Archer et al. 1998, p. ix). Over time, this can work toward a theory of a phenomenon that is not demonstrably false.

From a critical realism meta-theoretic perspective, we can thus review the literature on mysticism without necessarily taking a position. Mystics' subject matter of the ineffable (at the ontological level of the Real) need not baffle us, as we can deduce some of its features from mystical praxis (at the level of the Actual) and various mystical accounts (level of Empirical). Not only that, we do not require a common definition of "mysticism" in order to place these studies side by side. We can develop a definitional space identified by markers, rather than a single definition of mysticism. Our idea was not to produce a bibliography or even a historical narrative of the category of mysticism, but rather an analytical review. As above, we probed the literature for two questions: (i) what is mysticism, and (ii) who counts as a mystic? Our aim was to understand the boundary markers within which scholarship has tended to circulate on these two questions and, to some extent, where it stalled. It is quite possible that some study can be located that does not fall neatly into the definitional space we lay out here and, indeed, debate on this paper is welcomed to help refine or expand these markers. For now, we find two such markers for each question, arranged more or less as poles on an axis.

3. Axis I: The Essence of Mysticism

To respond to the first question, viz., what is mysticism, we find that studies tend to range between the extreme poles of reification and relativization, reflecting the perennialist common-core theorists and radical constructivists respectively. Of course, these are ideal types and extremes. It could hardly be expected that anyone would hold to radical positions on this axis, and many works either waver between two tendencies or have some, more or less unique, admixture. Still, the tendencies of scholarship on the essence of mysticism are relatively clear and the markers help identify a definitional space. In most cases, authors tend to privilege "experience" as a central category in the definition of mysticism on either pole.

3.1. Tending to Reification

Philosophical and psychological accounts in the early 20th century have tended to assume or portray mysticism as a reified, essential phenomenon common to all religious traditions. The modern usage of mysticism as a substantive *la mystique* dates back to the 17th century France (de Certeau 1992). De Certeau reads mysticism as a reaction to the rise

of modernity as a technocratic, mechanical, rationalized, compartmentalized perception of the world and self. That would explain why mysticism found a special niche in European Romanticism and German Idealism in the 18th and 19th centuries with a basic pillar of “experience” as an “intuited” feeling, originating with Schleiermacher and Otto (Martin 2016, p. 526). In the European and Anglo–American context, mysticism became the reverse side of the coin of modernity, the container view to oppose instrumental rationality and to create an alternative to declining institutional religion, offering a subjective experience “divorced from church and tradition” (Parsons 2020, p. 3).

It is in this context that we find one of the first and most well-known academic attempts at reflecting about mysticism as something that is pertinent to all human experience in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (first published in 1902 as the Gifford Lectures) by psychologist and philosopher William James. In his work, James formulated the now-classic but also heavily critiqued definition of mysticism as an experience characterized by (1) ineffability or defying any verbal expression; (2) noetic quality or “states of insights into depths of truth;” (3) transiency when “mystical states cannot be sustained for long”, and (4) passivity or as if being “grasped and held by a superior power” (James 2004, p. 295). For James, experiences stemming from drug and alcohol were akin to those suddenly occurring in contemplation of nature or cultivated in Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism. For him, individual religious experience has its roots in “mystical states of consciousness” that enables “the feeling of an enlargement of perception which seems imminent but which never completes itself” (James 2004, p. 298). Leigh Schmidt (2003) illustrates how William James was a product of his time in construing mysticism as a universal category. James’ inspiration was the Romantic making of mysticism within Transcendentalist Unitarian circles in the United States, who adopted it from the liberal Transcendentalist culture of modern Europe. New spiritual teachings, e.g., theosophy and anthroposophy (Hanegraaff 1998), experimentation with drugs in search of mystical experiences (Jay 2011), and evolving (Protestant) self-help ethos (Madsen 2014), all added to this search for the mystical in the West, in which James conceived and developed his ideas on mysticism.

Similar notions of mysticism followed through to other influential thinkers, such as English writer Evelyn Underhill who describes it as “the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order” (Underhill [1911] 2002, p. 14). Both James and Underhill were enthusiastic about the potential of psychology in exploring mystical states of consciousness. However, James approaches mysticism more as an episodic event or experience (his definition also points to it), while Underhill unpacks mysticism as a process, “the mystic way”, tracing the stages of growth towards mystic consciousness (Underhill [1911] 2002, p. 187). James is interested in mysticism as an abstract, theoretical phenomenon, leaning towards the construction of a reified notion of mysticism. Underhill talks of mysticism as a practice, focusing more on the actors or mystics themselves, their attributes, and what it means to be a mystic (e.g., Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec). Underhill’s approach is more modelled after Christian mysticism as she describes mystics as fully engaged, active individuals, driven not by their ambition but submission to God and “Mystic Love”, serving without any hope for reward (Milos 2011). This mystic-focused approach brings her closer to early sociological accounts of mysticism, which emerged in the same intellectual soil as her works.

Early sociological accounts on mysticism followed soon after James and Underhill. Weber famously devoted considerable ink to the subject (Weber [1922] 1993). He and Troeltsch (1992) would count as the founding pair of a sociology of mysticism, if there were to be such a field. Continuing with many of the German Idealist notions of mysticism,

Weber was more concerned with how mystics fit into the functionally differentiated boxes of society. In this case, passive/contemplative, world-fleeing (or other-worldly) mystics were differentiated from active, in-worldly (or this-worldly) “ascetics” (Adair-Toteff 2002). This polar, reified opposition of this-worldly religion and other-worldly mysticism (quite the opposite to what Underhill claimed in her works) seems to be a pillar of foundational sociology arising from Weber. Another tension introduced by Weber was to think of mysticism in terms of the Church-Sect model, roughly mapped onto Church as “socially organized objectivity” and rationalized bureaucracy vs. Sect as “socially organized subjectivity” and charisma. This connects with the conceptualization of religion as collective group vs. mysticism as socially isolated and individualistic (Robertson 1975, p. 245). Moreover, any materialized rituals were considered backward (Robertson 1975, p. 251). “True” mysticism was conceived in an anti-Augustinian idealism: “Only if the creaturely in man is totally silent can God speak in the soul” (Weber [1922] 1993). While he did not single out “experiences”, Weber’s approach presumes that mysticism is defined by a rather reified experience.

By contrast, Weber’s friend and discussant, Troeltsch was more explicit about the possibility of world-engaged mystics (Molendijk 2019). He identified mysticism as a third grouping between church and sect, often leading to mysticism being analyzed as a “cult”. Interestingly, Troeltsch, heavily influenced by James, was also very concerned with adding to psychological accounts the depth of feeling in mysticism, but never formulated a complete explanation. Despite their differences, Weber’s and Troeltsch’s idea of church-(mystic-)sect approached mysticism as a reified phenomenon that can be identified and studied across societies. The idealist and differentiated individualism of the mystic has been carried through to sociologists today. This near-classic accounts of mystics and hagiographies continue these pillars of sociological work and uncritical comparison beyond the Protestant West (e.g., Seppälä 2002; Stace 1960; Teasdale 1999). This tendency towards reification was part of the dominant scientific paradigm of the first half of the 20th century that searched for laws, commonalities, and functional categorizing. Yet, Underhill’s and Troeltsch’s emphasis on mystics and their engagement in the world added more nuances to dominant reified approaches.

Approaches to mysticism as universally shared in humanity paved the way for what later became known as a perennialist approach to mysticism (Parsons 2020). British philosopher and educator Walter T. Stace’s work was an important milestone in this approach. He argued that although mystical experiences may come in different cultural forms and different ages, there are, however, a number of common characteristics (Stace 1960, p. 14). According to Stace, what distinguishes mysticism from other phenomena is that it resides in mystical consciousness, which is radically different from our sensory-intellectual consciousness. Such consciousness, in the words of Stace, culminates in oneness or a One, “an ultimate nonsensuous unity in all things” (Stace 1960, p. 14). He distinguishes between an experience of this “undifferentiated unity” and its interpretation, which comes later (Stace 1960, p. 23). The Christian mystic interprets their experience as “union with God”, the Hindu mystic sees their experiences as identical with Brahman, and the Buddhist mystic, “at least according to some versions”, may not include the concept of a Supreme being at all (Stace 1961, p. 34). For Stace, mystical consciousness is “the same in all ages”, although it “clothes itself in the cultural ideas and philosophies of the age” (Stace 1960, p. 49). This postulate constitutes what Stace referred to as *the core of mysticism*. Stace also distinguishes between extrovertive and introvertive mysticism, with the former orientated towards the One in the outer world, and the latter in the inner world.

British thinker and novelist Aldous Huxley expressed a similar view in his “The Perennial Philosophy” (Huxley [1945] 2014). He later connected mystical experiences with

psychedelics (literally, *mind* or *soul manifesting* from Greek *psyche* and *delein*), which came to be known as substances, producing significant alterations to human perception, cognition, and emotion. The term itself first appears in correspondence between psychiatrist Humphry Osmond and Aldous Huxley. Osmond guided Huxley's intake of mescaline, and Huxley famously reported on his experiences in "The Doors of Perception", first published in 1954. The book became the key text of the psychedelic movement in the 1950–70s, and Huxley became known as the father, philosopher and "mastermind" of this movement (Baier 2021). Huxley was the first to connect perennial mysticism with psychedelics, of course following in the footsteps of other writers, like William James who talked about alcohol or nitrous oxide being able to "stimulate the mystical consciousness" (James 2004, p. 300). Huxley notes that for him mescaline granted a few hours of different vision of reality, a glimpse into "Mind at Large", "the eternal Suchness", the worlds accessible to Blake, Swedenborg, and Bach (Huxley 2010, pp. 3, 7, 18).

In the 1970s, psychologists Ralph Hood and W.A. Richards independently operationalized Stace's definition of mysticism in two extensively used self-report scales: the Mysticism Scale (M-Scale) (Hood 1975; Hood et al. 2001) and the Mystical Experiences Questionnaire (MEQ) (MacLean et al. 2012; Richards 2015). The three-factor Mystical Scale includes 32 statements, organized into eight four-item groupings, referring to positive effects, religious holiness, noetic quality, extrovertive and introvertive mystical states, timelessness/spinelessness and the ineffability of mystical experiences (Hood et al. 2001, p. 693). According to Hood, "mysticism is the best candidate for a distinct, *sui generis* experience that has been recognized across diverse traditions and cultures" (c.f. Hood and Chen 2005; Hood et al. 2018, p. 355). Hood's research on mysticism has extended its initial formulations and included non-Western contexts (e.g., Anthony et al. 2010; Barrett et al. 2017; Chen et al. 2011; Hood et al. 2001). Further refinements extended the four-factor MEQ based on 30 items from a lab-based study of psilocybin-induced mystical experiences (Barrett et al. 2015). Alternative psychometrics have been formulated for mystical states of "oneness" (Coomber and Harré 2022), "non-dual awareness" (Hanley et al. 2018), or the Altered State of Consciousness Rating Form (Studerus et al. 2010). One line of studies covers mystical senses in guided psychedelic use (Barrett and Griffiths 2017; Griffiths et al. 2018; Johnson et al. 2019; Reiff et al. 2020). Such scholarship tends to measure mystical experiences as the transcendence of time and space, deep euphoria, and the perception of being at one with "a larger whole". The common core thesis remains at the heart of psychometrics, and the challenge remains in how to quantify and compare such subjective measures across linguistic, class, gender, and other social boundaries. Psychometric approaches consolidated the notion of experience as a pivotal category in mystical states.

Scholar of Eastern religions, Robert C Zaehner (1961), and many others later questioned whether drug-induced experiences can be compared and equated with mystical experiences and ecstasy in religion, requiring years of trainings and intense religious practice. However, despite their differences, Stace, Huxley, and Zaehner recognized similarities across traditions and mystical experiences, and their works further reified notion of mysticism as something shared across cultures and time. All of them seemed to grant the ontological status to the reality that mystics tap into.

It should be noted that Stace's mysticism was operationalized after his death, and the author himself never had a chance to comment on its psychometric application in psychology. Undoubtedly, Stace's understanding of mysticism as accessible within and beyond religion ("atheistic mysticism") looked attractive for those, who tried to operationalize it on scientific grounds. However, Stace's understanding of mysticism as "paradoxical and self-contradictory" (Stace 1960, p. 237) that "cannot be described or analyzed in terms of

any of the elements of the sensory-intellectual consciousness" may seem to be at odds with the concept of questionnaires and item groupings of psychometrics.

Psychology, thus, was the first to introduce psychometrics to measure mystical experiences, which soon became the normative psychological approach to mysticism, most notably defended by Hood in the still-classic textbook of psychology of mysticism (2018). More than any other methods, psychometric operationalization of Stace's perennialism had led to the highly reified notion of mysticism. It is best known as the common core thesis, according to which mystical experiences have a "common, invariable core unaffected by the mystic's linguistic, cultural or religion background" (Gäb 2021, p. 234).

Parsons (2020) explains the popularity of the common core thesis and especially of perennial mysticism by the post-World War II cultural climate, where there was a need for unity and wholeness with the Eastern religions fulfilling the spiritual and political void. In a broader historical context of modernity, similar search of spiritual sharing in human history, turning gaze to the East in the face of the unfolding crisis of institutional religion in the West was an important trend in the transatlantic intellectual development in the 20th century. Rene Guenon, Ananda Coomaraswami, Frithjof Schuon, Martin Lings, and others formulated their perennial philosophies, pointing to one metaphysical truth and wisdom shared by all major religions. Many influential scholars were participants of the intellectual group *Eranos* with quarters in Switzerland, searching for human sharing in religion and myth (Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell), human psyche via symbols and archetypes (Carl Gustav Jung and Erich Neumann), Jewish mysticism (Gershom Scholem), and Islamic mysticism (Henri Corbin). Many worked on the assumption that mysticism is a vital element of all religions, and a universal, cross-cultural phenomenon, but did not align themselves with the common core thesis (Wilke et al. 2021, p. 7). In this context, the perennialist approach cannot be fully equated with the common core thesis thinkers, who might be better conceived as transcendentalists belonging to circles in the early 20th century (Schmidt 2003).

Anyhow, these different perceptions of mysticism leaning towards the pole of *reification* inherently emerged and developed in the period when positivism, universalism and perennialism dominated the scientific landscape in the first half of the 20th century. Part of that landscape in the language of CR was to collapse the three ontological layers such as that the Real (hidden reality) was seen as the same as the Actual (what mystics saw or heard), which in turn was fully equated with the Empirical (what mystics said or wrote). The winds of constructionism and particularism, particularly since the 1970s, brought more emphasis on unique, cultural expressions of mysticism, and made some scholars question the very category of mysticism.

3.2. Tending to Relativization

Many of the historical accounts of mysticism tend to a relativist or constructivist position that often label other views as "reified", "essentialist", or the like. Such accounts frequently tell a story of evoking mysticism within a certain religio-cultural context, dating it back inevitably to the Greek mystery cults (Parsons 2020), one of the oldest being the Eleusinian Mysteries (Burkert 1987). According to Cosmopoulos (2015), the Eleusinian "mysterion" (μυστήριον) was etymologically and semantically related to the verbs *myo* (μύω), "to close my eyes or mouth", and its causative *myeo* (μυέω) to "make someone close their eyes and mouth". The first was closely related to a *mystes* (μύστης), an initiate who is blind to the truth prior to the initiation, *myesis* (μύησις), while the latter related to the oath of silence taken after the process of initiation. *Mystikos* (μυστικός) and *mysteria* (μυστήρια) in antiquity were applied with reference to such mystery cults. *Mysteria* was the term commonly used to refer to the secret and sacred aspects of such cults. Antique

studies continue to operate with this emic term to reconstruct and analyze mystery cults of antiquity (Burkert 1987; Cosmopoulos 2015; Kellis 2017; Rogers 2012; Wasson et al. 2008). However, despite the affinity of *mysteria* with mysticism, antique studies remain in isolation from academic discussions on mysticism. Scholars of mysticism also rarely refer to this scholarship with the exception of post-Jungian depth psychology studies on mysticism (Cattoi and Odorisio 2018; Downing 1994; Harding 1990; Stein and Corbett 2023; Tiaynen-Qadir and Qadir 2023).

Relativization of the very term mysticism comes into its own with historical accounts of the term in Christianity. Ramelli (2021) illustrates how early Christian writers—Clement, Origen, Nyssen, and Evagrius—imported “mystery” terminology from mystery cults to Christianity, pointing to the symbolic, hidden nature of Scripture and the apophatic nature of a triune God, i.e., inaccessible and inapprehensible through human terms and reason. Knowing God either through apophatic, negative theology or/and cataphatic, affirmative theology became an important thread in Christian mysticism and remains so up till now (Lossky 1976; McGinn 2016; Rahner 1971; Turner 1998; Vainio 2020). Sometimes this distinction is evoked to relate to the historical differences between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy (Hann and Goltz 2010; Roudometof 2014) or Protestantism and Counter-Reformation Catholic mysticism, and sometimes within writings of a single mystic (Arblaster and Faesen 2016). Among all the variations, the goal of the mystic path is rather similar, namely a direct, transcendental union with God, which is in some way a sort of peak experience.

Meanwhile, contemporary theological accounts remain occupied with discussions and notions of mysticism as a union with God within respective traditions, e.g., the voluminous history of Western Christian mysticism by McGinn titled “Presence of God” (McGinn 1991, 2023). Or, there is an attention to geographies and gender, mystical authors from the Low Countries (Arblaster and Faesen 2016) or female mystics from England (Nelstrop 2019). Mystical theology in Eastern Christianity (Lossky 1976; Ware 1995) is relatively isolated and understudied in the Anglo–American academic world, although some initial comparative analysis have been initiated (McGinn et al. 1985). This self-contained emphasis on Christianity, especially Western Christian mysticism, on the one hand, further reifies this religious tradition, and, on the other hand, relativizes respective versions of mystic paths to only isolated cultural contexts, localities, and individuals. Following McGinn’s approach, the Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology (Howells and McIntosh 2020) de-emphasizes “mysticism” and individual experience in favor of a “comprehensive engagement with Christian beliefs and teachings” in historical context. Again the work is devoted to (overwhelmingly Western) Christianity, but offers a useful way to contextualize mysticism in a doctrinal tradition (c.f. McIntosh 1998).

Many Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Jewish thinkers and practitioners contributed also to the modern construction of mysticism. Some critiqued and rejected “mysticism” (e.g., like Zen-Master Sharu Sōen and Daisetz T. Suzuki in Buddhism or Dayananda in the Advaita-Vedānta). Instead, they argued for using categories of their traditions or aligning their teachings with scientific rationality, another dominant Western discourse of the time. Others incorporated “mysticism” (e.g., Anagarika Govinda in Buddhism or Chinmayananda in the Advaita-Vedānta) in the philosophies and practices of their traditions (Reichl 2021; Schmidt-Leukel 2013; Wilke 2021b), but molded the term to their own doctrinal advantage. Adding to the complexity, Eastern traditions became incorporated in practices in the West, like Buddhism shaping mindfulness practices in psychology and research on neuroscience (Ricard and Singer 2017; Yamashiro 2015), and Advaita-Vedānta informing modern understandings of mysticism, including what constitutes a mystical peak experience (Wilke 2021b, p. 432).

In addition to history and theology, the modern tendency to relativize the category of mysticism is popular in anthropology, area studies, and theological accounts, which are typically confined to one tradition, with little cross-over (Arblaster and Faesen 2016; Bilu 2019; McGinn 1991; McIntosh 1998; Schimmel 1975, 1993; Werbner 2017). A very recent development has been the study of black mysticism (Bostic 2013; Moten 2013; Prevot 2016). The overarching aim of this scholarship is to recover African (mostly African American) mysticism that has been overlooked in scholarship because it has been misrecognized since African cultures have been silenced. Similar relativizations of mysticism take place with gender (Hollywood 2002; Lanzetta 2005) or other identifications traditionally oppressed in academia and that offer different perspectives. albeit with little interaction across disciplines. In this way, these studies of specificity took the next step in the equation of mysticism with peak experience. They argued that experience was only valid to think about as an interpreted experience and that the interpretation was necessarily contextual.

Of course, the idea that mysticism is relative to the “culture” (however that is defined) of the claimed mystic is typically grounded in the major (and well known) critique of the common core thesis by philosopher and Jewish studies scholar, Steven Katz (1978, 1979). Katz argued that “there are no pure (i.e., unmediated) experiences” (Katz 1978, p. 26), nor is there substantive evidence of existence of “pure consciousness per se achieved by these various, common mystical practices” (Katz 1978, p. 57). For Katz, the Christian mystics do not experience some unidentified reality, which they then interpret as God, but rather their experiences have been at least partially prefigured by Christian symbols, images, concepts of God, figures of Jesus, and the like. The Buddhist experience of nirvana, the Jewish of *devekuth*, the Christian of *unio mystica*, the Sufi of *fana*, the Taoist of Tao are hence at least partly the outcome of “the complex epistemology activity which is set in motion by the integrating character of self-consciousness employed in the specific mystical modality” (Katz 1978, p. 62). Epistemologically speaking, the “truth” of Castaneda’s Don Juan and the use of psychedelic peyote has little to do with “truth” of satori by the Zen master, and the “noetic” quality of these experience cannot be a point for comparison (Katz 1978, p. 62). Katz sees cross-cultural phenomenological accounts of mystical experiences, including by Stace and Zaehner as reductive, inflexible and “phenomenologically and philosophically suspect” (1978, p. 25). For many following Katz, it became self-evident to underline that “pure experience” was an untenable philosophical position to hold, and that experience was indelibly tied to interpretation. Since interpretation is contextual, the argument goes, so must be mysticism as a category, and it is therefore shaped, if not directed, by doctrinal beliefs, cultural expectations, communal images, and so on.

It is important to note that Katz did not seem to intend any extreme relativized position. First, he stated that mystical experiences “at least partially” prefigured by culture, accepting that other factors may play a role (Katz 1978, p. 62). Second, his agenda was to balance dominant at the time approaches that (often vaguely) overstressed universality of mysticism; a “plea for the recognition of differences” in his own words (Katz 1978, p. 25). As an example, Gershom Scholem in his classic, foundational work on Jewish mysticism, was also wavering between the poles of reification and relativization, one the one hand, operating with a general definition of mysticism as the human “striving” for and “an awareness of the living experience of the Divine”, but, on the other hand, stating that mysticism is a particular “phenomenon with a traditional context of traditional religion” with a Jew perceiving it in the traditional images of Judaism, and Christians in the images of their tradition (Scholem 1967, pp. 2, 3, 8, 12).

Anyhow, Katz’s seminar work and its reception signified a constructionist turn in academic studies of mysticism with long-felt consequences and implications (Parsons 2020). In the post-Katz phase, discussions on mysticism were dominated by the perenni-

alist/constructionist divide. A well-known example of historical deconstruction comes from de Certeau (1992) “The Mystical Fable”, where he talks of the Christian roots of the construction of mysticism, showing that even the idea that union with God and knowledge of God is intuitive rather than discursive is, itself, a historically situated idea, which emerged in the 12th century. Philosopher Wayne Proudfoot (1987) also demonstrated that the form and content of mysticism cannot be so easily separated as foundational and positivist studies had assumed. Something similar had been happening with the broader category of religion, and many have connected the two critiques (Hammer 2020; Proudfoot 1987; Wilke 2021a). Wilke (2021a, p. 14) points out that especially in cultural studies of religion, perennialism and essentialism became unacceptable and any attempts at pointing to a mystical kernel across religions were soon deemed as “unscientific”.

A more nuanced version can be found in Jess Hollenback’s influential formulation of the contextuality of perceptual and affective content of mystical experiences (Hollenback 1996). Hollenback balanced this contextuality with three seemingly cultural-neutral and hence reified notions, viz., “empowerment” of imagination, thoughts and desires in mystical states, a sense of unity, and feeling of timelessness. He adds these three to James’ four features of mystical experience (ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity).

In general, though, among relativized, historicized accounts of today, William James’ methodology and approach is heavily critiqued as a-cultural, vague, decontextualized, and blind to its own cultural rootedness in Western modernity (Schmidt 2003; Taves 2020). The ultimate example of relativization in the existing research is the call to abandon the term altogether. Historicized critiques have led some to the conclusion that mysticism is entirely a “false category” and an “essentialist illusion” (Penner 1983). Alongside similar lines, some suggest that the category of mysticism burdened with its Christian connotations or a-cultural vagueness of the common core thesis have little analytical usefulness, especially in studies beyond Christianity (Hammer 2020; Hanegraaff 2013; Huss 2007, 2020; Komarovski 2015).

Ralph Hood’s scale similarly came under an attack in some of the most rigorous critiques of the category of mysticism by Ann Taves, who claims that experience is not a phenomenological and eruptive event, but rather a culturally constituted one, i.e., a “process by which religious and nonreligious phenomena are made and unmade” (Taves 1999, p. 331). Taves argues for an empirical, qualitative mapping of what and how (an) experience is termed “mystical” or “religious” (especially Taves 2009). Critiquing Hood’s scale for its recognition of only positive outcomes, Taves argues that many such experiences may be also debilitating (e.g., with psychedelics). She proposes the term “nonordinary experience” and the Inventory of Nonordinary Experiences, INOE (Taves 2020).

The constructionist turn was vital in critiquing earlier, at times naïve accounts of mysticism. While the reifiers tend to collapse CR’s three layers into a flat ontology, the relativists commit what Bhaskar termed the *epistemic fallacy*. That is, they collapse all of ontology onto epistemology by equating what *is* to what we *know*, ultimately determined by *how* we know. Since the last is so particularly defined by circumstance, at the extreme relativists seemed to have stopped all exchange and conversation on the subject across religions and traditions. For almost forty years, mysticism fell out of favor to the position of “oblivion and insignificance” in religious studies (Wilke et al. 2021, p. 8). Of course, Stace’s work can now be easily critiqued for the lack of rigor, misrepresentation and generalization of major religious traditions (e.g., non-dualistic mysticism of the East and the dualistic mysticism of the West) or interpretations of St. Teresa of Avila’s writings bordering on misogyny (e.g., her lack of the “analytical mind” and ability to express herself) (Stace 1960, pp. 24, 176–77). Still, it is difficult to understand how Stace’s “The Teachings of the Mystics”, which is more a compellation of sources with comments, could have ever been approached as a comprehensive cross-cultural study and served as a basis for full-scale

psychometric operationalization. The book was more an invitation to a conversation that never happened. Indeed, the reception of his synthesis of mystical teachings to explore theoretical commonalities is symptomatic of the ambiguity now evident in the definition of mysticism.

4. Axis II: Access to Mysticism

The second question we investigate in the literature on mysticism is, “Who counts as a mystic?” This is a broad formulation but the responses are, again, ranged along an axis with two extreme, ideal-type poles at either end that we term rarification and laification. These are, respectively, the notions that only a select (typically, trained) few can count as mystics such as the exemplars most are familiar with, or that anyone and everyone either can be a mystic or, indeed, has had mystical experiences. Again, these are ideal types and no one study can be expected to hold an extreme position about who can have access to mysticism. That being said, the tendencies are even more clearly identifiable along this axis than the previous.

4.1. Tendency to Rarification

Historians of antiquity showed that the idea that only a few experts could handle the mediation between the worldly and celestial realms is an old one and runs throughout history regarding Egyptian priests, brahmins or elders in Indigenous communities (Burkert 1987; Cosmopoulos 2015; David 2000). This idea of rarified mysticism is found in the great mysteries of Antiquity, where only initiates could participate in apprehending the truth. They were not allowed to disclose the revealed truth or the content of the cult on penalty of death (Cosmopoulos 2015, p. 15). The very origin of the term “mysticism” in the context of Eleusinian mysteries points to it as something that is hidden and cannot be uttered or easily shared. Mysteries were not available to anyone, but only to those who were initiated (Cosmopoulos 2015, p. 158).

On the other hand, the number of the initiates, estimated at two or three thousand in a yearly rite, indicates that participation in the mysteries was accessible to many in all three stages of the initiation process (Cosmopoulos 2015, p. 20). Special messengers (*spondophoroi*) were sent to all Greek states, including Egypt and Syria in the Hellenistic period, to proclaim a holy truce lasting for 55 days to celebrate the initiation, which lasted 9 days. There is no evidence that any groups were excluded from these celebrations. On the contrary, the surrounding festivities and initiation were available to lay people, including women who otherwise were confined to private space. But, of course, only priestesses and priests had access to all details of the initiation, including preparing the *kykeon*, the special portion of the Eleusinian mysteries, which speaks for the different degrees to access. Furthermore, only the *hierophants*, or shamans leading the rituals, were completely absorbed in the ecstatic mediation with the unseen realm. The congregation would be revealed secrets only in degrees corresponding to their need and readiness.

Ramelli points out that Christian writers like Clement adopted this rarified aspect in that “the mysteries of the Logos” couldn’t be revealed to the non-initiated (Ramelli 2021, p. 32). However, similarly to pre-Christian mysteries, there came to be an ambiguity and fluctuations between the poles of rarification and laification in the great body of Christendom. This holds also true for the interpretations of ancient and medieval Christian writers by contemporary scholars.

The idea of mysticism being rare is intimately tied to the assumption that it is a peak experience open to a select and trained few. For example, it is well known that many church fathers reserved their detailed written guidance for monastic orders, not lay people. However, St Symeon the New Theologian (10th century theologian) stated that contem-

plative union was possible for all alike, and, unlike many others of his contemporaries, shared his experience of divine light and spiritual path (Palmer et al. 1995). Recent readings of Christian mysticism suggest that some female mystics emphasized women's access to mystical experiences (McGinn 2000; Nelstrop 2019). Marguerite Porete and her "The Mirror of Simple Souls" explicitly talk of women, inspired by God as "Church the More" in contrast to the institutional "Church the Less". Generally, it seems that many traditions resort to the idea that mystic path is a path of many years of training, spiritual practices, and techniques, often under guidance of a guru, a master, or a spiritual father, where esoteric aspect of religion unfolds over time. Whether the term mysticism is explicitly used or not, this idea of maturing into a tradition with the path that takes years has been rather common to specialist research on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism (Knysh 2000; Komarovski 2015; Lossky 1976; McGinn 1991; Schimmel 1975; Schmidt-Leukel 2013; Ware 1995; Wilke 2021b). In terms of CR, we identify this pole with a severe limitation on epistemological access to mystical knowledge. The question of fallibility does not arise, since those who access mystical knowledge are deemed to be the experts, i.e., gatekeepers who would determine if *others* were competent or not.

4.2. Tendency to Laification

The modern construction of mysticism not only changed the term but also redefined who can access it. As the term crossed the boundaries of Christian theology it loosened up to include New Age spiritualities, esoteric practices beyond institutional religion, and drug-induced mysticism. New Age practitioners and theosophists in many ways drew on exotification and romanticization of the East as "mystic", while adepts from other traditions, like Advaita Vedānta, adopted the term to relate their spiritual messages better to Western audiences (Wilke 2021b). As the audience of the term broadened, so did its meaning and content, and we observe a clear laification tendency in the literature on mysticism.

Writers like James or Huxley paved the path for such laification, although their understanding was more nuanced than often perceived. For instance, James seems to operate on the assumption that there are different layers of experiences related to mysticism. He talks about "the simplest rudiment of mystical experience" in moments of deep insights or when "something sweeps over us" (James 2004, pp. 296–97). The next step for James is those territories that public opinion deems pathological, namely the consciousness produced by intoxicants and alcohol (James 2004, p. 300). Nature beauty can awaken mystical moods, but does not necessarily qualify as mystical experience (e.g., the realization of the insignificance of the self in the presence of the unstoppable power of the Niagara Falls, feeling of being an atom, "too small for the notice of Almighty God" (James 2004, p. 305)). For James, these are glimpses into the consciousness that is entirely different from our normal, walking, rational consciousness. James' classic definition of mysticism associated with ineffability, a noetic quality, transiency, and passivity relates more to a "peak experience". However, his own writings point to the recognition of the importance of the "methodical cultivation" of mystical consciousness as part of the religious life across traditions (James 2004, p. 310). This more nuanced reading opens up different understandings of mysticism and who can access such states, at what stage, and to which degree. The same is evident in Hollenback's (1996) account, where mystical experiences are not limited to a select few but are accessible to anyone under the right conditions and with the practices. However, as above, Hollenback does hold that *what* different mystics experience is affectively and perceptually informed by their cultural context.

It is also possible to read some ambivalence, or wavering in Aldous Huxley's famous "Doors of Perception", which is usually seen as a plea for laified, "everyday mysticism", accessible to everyone. In his famous Filter Theory, Huxley argues that psychedelics disable

the biological and socio-cultural filters of normal consciousness and perception, opening doors to new perceptions and experiences. However, as Baier (2021, p. 370) illustrates when analyzing Huxley's writings across his life span, psychedelic mystical experience was not an end in itself for Huxley. According to Huxley, the insights gained were to be stabilized with regular religious or meditation practices to "permeate all of life". In other words, "everyday mysticism" meant something different for Huxley, more like a new acting and perception of the world after one's consciousness was transformed. Huxley's imageries and metaphors are Western Christian in nature, including when he compares the potential effect of psychedelics with a Catholic "gratuitous grace". Huxley argued for the occasional use of psychedelics in combination with rituals, including rites of passage, meditation and reading sacramental texts (Baier 2021; Huxley 2010). Again, this processual understanding of psychedelic-related mystical experiences points to Huxley's fluctuation between the poles of laification and rarification. However, Huxley's advocacy for a wider social application of psychedelics in relation to mystical experiences and changing people's consciousness certainly worked towards the laification trend. Yet, that too was informed by his interpretation of experiences of mescaline as Being-Consciousness-Bliss. There he was influenced by Advaita-Vedānta notions, likely engendered by his relations to Vivekananda's Vedanta Society (Wilke 2021b, p. 401). Again, Huxley retained the notion of mysticism being an experience, but was concerned to broaden out access to such experiences for (virtually) anybody.

The tendency to laification has accelerated in the recent uptake of mysticism. McDaniel (2018) notes that religious institutions like the Catholic Church were so rigid in their investigations into dogmatic correctness of mystical experiences and pronouncements, that most people's experiences that played with dogma were simply pushed aside. She suggests there is a recovery underway of such neglected experiences, which is a good example of the laification we refer to. In fact, religious institutions can be seen already in the 20th century embracing a more laified approach. With the membership decline of institutional religion and the rise of alternative spiritualities, some scholarship of Christianity appeals to mysticism to make their traditions more relatable for practitioners. Theologian Karl Rahner famously notes, "the devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic, one who has 'experienced something,' or he [sic] will cease to be anything at all" (Rahner 1981, p. 15). Prevot suggests that this means acknowledging God's presence in the midst of the normal, everyday, and that God works mystically within the Christian (Prevot 2022). In Eastern Christianity, theologians like Vladimir Lossky (1976), Alexander Schmemmann (1991), Kallistos Ware (1995), Andrew Louth (2007) and others revived and reaffirmed the mystical nature of Eastern Christianity, especially for Western audiences.

Similar trends are evident in other traditions. Wilke notes that Vedānta and Buddhist masters taught the wisdom of their religious traditions to a broader Western audience, popularizing and laifying it. Chinmayananda advocated for the practical use of Vedānta in every action, at home and under any circumstance (Wilke 2021b, p. 422). In philosophy, art and area studies, this trend manifests in scholarly attempts to reinterpret mystics of the past and across traditions to trace how mysticism influenced arts and philosophy of today. As an example, the edited collection by Vega et al. (2018) convincingly explores the transformative power of medieval Catalan-Majorcan mystic Ramon Llull for later texts visual arts, music, philosophy, religion, and politics. This tendency attests to an increased openness of scholars/practitioners in institutional and traditional religions to broaden and provide different layers of their definition of mysticism and mystics, and, therefore, recognizing that potentially all are invited.

The tendency to laification is taken to an extreme in contemporary psychology, which operates with a broad notion of mysticism and equates it with a more or less measurable

experience. Psychometricians employ the term mostly from definitions provided by James and Stace to measure mystical experiences (MEs), characterized by transcendence of space and time, profound feelings of unity and connectedness with the world and all that exists, empathy, and a sense of awe (Barrett et al. 2017; Barrett and Griffiths 2017; Brekxema and Elk 2021; Chen et al. 2011; Hood and Chen 2005). The laification here expresses itself, for example, in different “translations” of the Mysticism Scale to include secular (“ultimate reality”) and religious languages (“God”) as well as adaptations for different cultural contexts (Hood et al. 2001).

Michael Pollan’s (2018) wildly popular study of psychedelics, coupled with the Netflix miniseries, has been instrumental in the psychedelic revival after three decades of taboo. However, the “psychedelic renaissance” in scholarship has further contributed to the laification of mysticism. The focus here is on psychedelic-assisted therapies to treat depression, anxiety, and addictions (Barrett et al. 2015; Barrett and Griffiths 2017). Episodic mystical experiences occasioned by psychedelics are seen as having potentially therapeutic effects, like lowering of defense mechanisms, increased acceptance, sense of purpose, and spirituality, and a reduced fear of death among cancer patients (Wolff et al. 2020; Yaden et al. 2017). This therapeutic emphasis is patient-oriented, and, therefore, mystical experiences are seen as universal and potentially accessible to all clients, thus leading to further laification of mysticism.

Resistance to this approach comes both from within and outside the psychological establishment. As noted above, Taves (2020) claims that the term “mystical experience” does not capture the varieties and range of experiences patients may encounter. Some suggest decoupling psychedelic research from the mystical and religious altogether (Strassman 2018). This can be explained by the Western secular roots of mainstream psychology, and the fear of “weird” and messy reality (Brekxema and Elk 2021). Emerging Jungian scholarship opposes the dominant instrumental, biomedical, and psychometric emphasis in “psychedelic renaissance”, advocating for a more thorough contextualization of the patient’s history and individuation (Stein and Corbett 2023). Of course, both Jungian and psychedelic research remain on the margin of mainstream psychology. Outside the psychological milieu, the critique comes from anthropologists who warn that “psychedelic research” can become a form of (neo)colonization of Indigenous knowledge of sacred plants (Frenopoulo and Goulart 2022). Following in Zaehner’s steps (1961), contemporary theologians largely continue to shun the idea of comparing drug-induced experiences with mysticism in religion (Prevot 2022).

Finally, further laification of mysticism is associated with practitioners themselves defining what mysticism is, and, therefore, who has access to it. Such studies somewhat reduce mysticism to first-person psychology and often conflate it with esoteric, spiritual practices, ecology, and a “spiritual but not religious” stance (Brown 2003; Pedersen et al. 2021; Wixwat and Saucier 2021). With this vague understanding, the category of mysticism dissolves into an emic, first-person account of whatever someone calls “mystical”. Thus, this line of thinking and scholarship leans towards the extreme laification as everybody has access to the mystical because everyone decides what the mystical is. Again, in terms of CR’s epistemological relativism, this is the opposite take on certainty from the rarified pole. For a laified view, certainty can be declared by anyone and there is no room for falsifiability or judgmental rationality.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

After 40 years of taboo, mysticism studies are slowly staging a scientific comeback bolstered by new methodologies. Cautiously reviving the term, researchers focus on different constructions of mysticism while avoiding common, essentialist definitions (e.g.,

Wilke et al. 2021). Such *post-critique* approaches continue to illustrate the relevance of the mystical in the past and in modernity, including in forms not previously explored (like Shamanism, Garb 2011; Lewis 2003). Indeed, it is clear that mysticism has never been as popular as it is now outside the academia, and this emic reality cannot be ignored by simply due to the inconvenient ambiguity the term entails.

Our paper set out to unpack this ambiguity by asking how 20th century scholarship, which had more less reached an impasse, tended to define mysticism and whom they have considered to be mystics. Our findings suggest that studies of mysticism can be usefully ranged along two axes, one related to the essence of mysticism as reified or relativized, and these second related to access to mystical knowledge as rarified or laified. We conceptualize these as a two-dimensional grid (Figure 1).

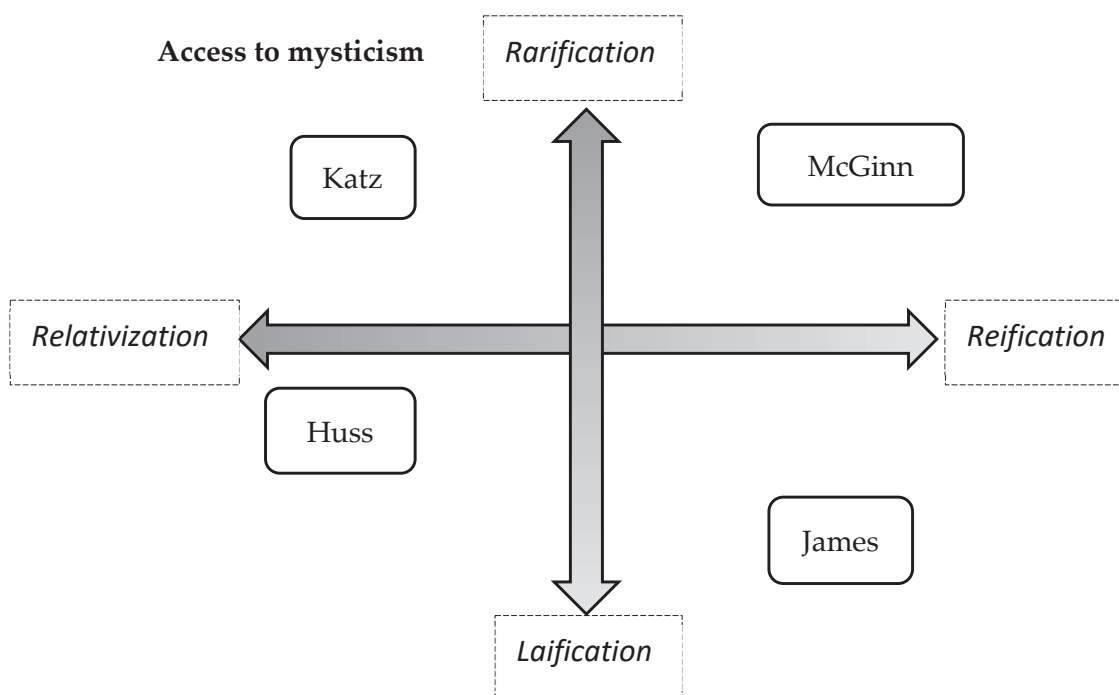


Figure 1. Mysticism: a field of ambivalences.

This graphic is intentionally simplified to convey the basic idea of two converging axes (essence of and access to mysticism), and we illustrate the space between the extreme markers with some, representative thinkers. We suggest that this figure conceptualizes the way people have thought about or studied mysticism in the 20th century. It is not that scholars set out necessarily to strategically or intentionally defend or attack a position on these axes, or that this is all they are concerned with, but rather that these are simply the categories of thought along which mysticism is discussed. Consider, for example, the study of psychedelics in relation to mysticism. That topic fits into how people have approached the study of mysticism in general. Those regarding mysticism as rarified have concentrated on the use of psychedelics by shamans and only under controlled conditions or to a lower extent by lay people or whole communities. Then, their view of mysticism also tends to relativization, specific to that circumstance, that religious tradition, that time period, etc. On the other hand, those regarding mysticism as a more laified concept, tend to study psychedelics as engendering mystical experience among (potentially) any one and then develop measures to assess that. Their view of mysticism concomitantly tends to be more reified, toward a common core that all people can be seen to experience.

We also place these axes and poles statically so as not convey the sense that there has been some inevitable, or easily tracked, historical shift of ideas. Yes, it does appear more

likely for mysticism to be discussed as laified today than it was over a century ago, but this is neither a complete statement nor a particularly useful one, for we can find numerous approaches to lay mysticisms in the past, and so on.

Again, we have hardly included all the studies of mysticism; even if such a feat were possible, we propose that it should be possible to range the overlooked studies similarly. The two poles on either axis are ideal types, extreme positions that no one study could be expected to fully adopt. Rather, most of the literature has tendencies to one or the other pole on either axis, which illustrates well the ambivalence in the field of mysticism studies regarding what precisely it is studying. In fact, not just is the field as a whole ambivalent but many individual studies include this ambivalence as well. Seminal studies such as by James or Huxley, Troeltsch or Katz, all can be read as incorporating different poles at different points in the works. In terms of disciplines, we might see the essence of mysticism as being reified mostly in philosophy, psychology, and sociology, but as relativized mostly in anthropology, history and theology. And we might see access to mystical knowledge as elite and rarified by history, anthropology, theology, or sociology, but as laified by psychology or philosophy. The latter two are at the forefront of the recent psychedelic movement, which assumes that mystical insight is open to all with the right pill or plant. Once more, these disciplinary boundaries are highly porous and grouping studies by discipline seems less helpful than identifying each study's tendencies. Whether or not this categorization proves as potent for describing recent studies of mysticism, say since 2010, or earlier ones, say before the 19th century, remains to be studied.

In any case, what these two ambivalences tell us is that there was good reason for the study of mysticism to reach an impasse. To some extent, studies continued in their own tendencies with little field-wide mutual engagement or cross development. While permissive, such a *laissez-faire* attitude, so to speak, has not been productive for field-wide theorizing. But now, the methodological insights into non-essentialist definitions—fuzzy, polythetic, polyvalent clusters, and family resemblances—all speak to a new, post-critique possibility for reinitiating the search for a theory of mysticism. From that point of view, the two ambivalences we identify here constitute a theoretical space, with markers at four ends within which the placement of studies of mysticism can be used to return to the ambitious task of theory-building.

We identified critical realism as a useful, meta-theoretic perspective from which to build such a theory of mysticism. The format of basic critical realism we used allowed for an *ontological realism* with a stratified social ontology, which is perfectly suited for the study or understanding of mysticism. That is, we do not need to—and, indeed, cannot—access all aspects of intransitive, strictly infinite reality that mystics claim to reach but we can still outline how that reality operates indirectly by way mechanisms and powers that are activated in actual space and then observed in empirical space. The move from experience to consciousness is also central to CR in its other iterations, which we have not unpacked here. CR also posits *epistemological relativism*, which is a good perspective to embrace the ambivalences without needing to resolve them. We can reliably and productively map the transitive space between ambivalences, recognizing that different, fallible approaches address different aspects of the same reality (e.g., mystical consciousness). Finally, the CR tenet of *judgmental rationality* means that individual descriptions or theorizations can be placed side by side, as we have begun to do, and then gauged according to their consistency or compatibility with observed phenomena, which we have not yet done. Such assessment is, of course, the step to follow as a precursor to theory-building. For theory-building, Bhaskar's final statement of Philosophy of MetaReality (Bhaskar 2002) might provide a sound basis, with its explicit incorporation of nondual consciousness.

At this stage, we can identify one, unexpected finding that can help such critical realist theory-building in the future. At the center of both axes, the origin point, so to speak, of mysticism studies is the category of “experience”. For most of the 20th century, this origin has been undisputed across both axes. Scholars seem to have used the term “mystical experience” self-evidently and unquestioningly. However, many have shown the problems with uncritical acceptance of “mystical experience” as a philosophical category (e.g., McGinn 2008; Roy 2001). From a CR perspective, Bhaskar points out a major concern with “experience” in general, which may be extended to “mystical experience”. He notes:

By secreting an ontology based on the category of experience, three domains of reality (the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical) are collapsed into one. This prevents the crucial question of the conditions under which experience is, in fact, significant in science from being posed . . . the effects of positivism, or rather of the philosophical problem-field that underpins it, on the philosophy of social science have been hegemonic. This problem-field is defined by an ontology of experience, *empirical realism*. (Bhaskar 1979, pp. 16, 21)

In terms of CR, the category of “experience” tends to an epistemic fallacy, which is that we (can) know only what (can) see. That is, the stratified ontology postulated by CR is flattened into a single ontology defined only and wholly by what we can observe. And it has the further trap of privileging peak experiences. This becomes utterly significant when we discuss mysticism, where mystics’ reports move past their experiences and to their consciousness or awareness. From the CR perspective, then, it is not that experience is not relevant, but it is not all that is relevant, nor indeed would it be the most relevant category when discussing mysticism. The accounts of mystics form the empirical basis to discover the events that they recount, including experience but also rituals, practices, trainings, doctrinal education, etc. All of these (in the ontological level of the actual, posited by CR) can be used to deduce the ontological level of the Real, which is where causes and structures can be said to “exist”. CR thus rejects behaviorism or such empiricist realisms and favors more contextual and nuanced approaches to events.

One recent suggestion that would work very well with a CR perspective is to replace “experience” with “mystical consciousness” as a category that subsumes and exceeds “experience”. Chief among these proposals is the well-developed formulation by McGinn (2008). Others adapt the consciousness studies model of Lonergan, (e.g., Roy 2003), or then follow other models (Clark 1965; Forman 1999; Martin 2014; Moore 1957). More study is still needed to determine whether the approach to mysticism qua state of consciousness can fit with the CR ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality. On the face of it, mystical consciousness allows some variations in how mysticism is studied but still grounds the play of infinite variation that mysticism is whatever anyone or any culture chooses to call it. Moreover, it connects to Roy Bhaskar’s later formulations of MetaReality, which theorize nondual and transcendent consciousness in terms of how we related to and know the world. We find this to be a promising direction to theorize mysticism past the recent impasse. However, only rigorous, empirically grounded studies can show whether “mystical consciousness” can form an origin for a post-critique recovery of theorizing mysticism from a critical realist perspective.

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Article

Wittgenstein's Mysticism(s)

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Abstract: I will argue that the examination regarding the topic of mysticism should play a much bigger role when it comes to the ensemble of Wittgenstein's writings. In this sense, while drawing upon previous analyses, I will make the case that the *Tractarian* mystical spirit still animates other works by the author such as his *Lectures on Ethics* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. Then, I will propose that the unity of this mysticism lies in the *sui generis* discovery (or shock) that the world exists; however, as his work progresses, different strategies will be employed to convey this type of message—and they shall vary from the attempt of putting such a perspective into words until the full annihilation of the mere possibility in this regard. Hence, there would be one fundamental underlying type of mysticism in Wittgenstein's proposals, but the unveiling of such a mystical insight will demand different forms of exposition and understanding.

Keywords: Mysticism; Wittgenstein; *Tractatus*; *Lecture on Ethics*; *Philosophical Investigations*

1. Introduction: Philosophical Mysticism and Wittgenstein's Role

Jan van Ruysbroeck, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, Edith Stein... these are all names who could be easily tied to the tradition of philosophical mysticism. But as Steven T. Katz (1978) once suggested, it is hard to define exactly what a “mystic” is as several meanings and definitions might be applied to the same word. Moreover, many times, religious beliefs from which the denominations “mystic”, “mystical”, or “mysticism” arise are neither similar nor presuppose a coincident set of practices, and yet the term “mystic” may be equally applied to adepts of a different set of creeds. Just as an example, both Nagarjuna and John of the Cross could be considered mystics in spite of their cultural differences and eventual semantic distinctions regarding the employment of supposedly all-encompassing definitions for terms such as God, Void, union, nothingness, and darkness, which are utilized by them along the pages of their respective works. By that, I want to advance the notion that an exact definition for this “mystical” terminology is not an easy task to pursue. Thus, one solution at this point would be to consider the term “mystic” as an umbrella for those who claim the possibility of the existence of a different form of presence, usually ineffable, albeit rigorously imbued with a sense of reality and meaning, which brings about in those who have experienced it, the belief that they have been in touch with a superior dimension or another irreducible form of reality (Lima 2023). In religious discourses, this perception often assumes the connotation of a *sub specie aeternitatis* form of divine contemplation or union, whereas, in philosophy, this insight is considered as a possibility for expression (or even existence) beyond the limits determined by logical rationality and discourse.

If this definition is a coherent one, and I think it is, then it is not absurd to claim that we could make the case for Wittgenstein being a “mystic” both personally and intellectually. His biography, in this regard, is a “case closed”; there are many reports of those who were well acquainted with him attesting to his eccentric (even odd) behavior, which is not so different from what is exhibited by devout religious people who may cause many perplexities along their search for isolation and communion with their God. There is

no doubt either about his deep appreciation for religion and religious views despite his continual refusal to establish any doctrines or analyses for them. In sum, if we were to look at Wittgenstein's life while making the hypothetical exercise of imagining that he was simply an ordinary individual—as if he had not written the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1993; henceforth, *TLP*) or the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 2009); solely basing our opinions on his personal diaries in addition to his story on the trenches while serving the Austro-Hungarian Empire—that would be enough to qualify him as a “mystic”; if not, he would at least pass as an extremely “uncanny” religious individual. His comments on the likes of Tolstoy and his subsequent religious conversion, his attempt at becoming a monk, his retreat to the Austrian mountains, and the bequeathal of his earthly possessions to his siblings, in addition to many other passages of his life, make this point abundantly clear.

However, when it comes to his writings, this same “mystical” appraisal has not been utilized to examine his work. As a matter of fact, in this regard, the situation is even more critical because in many cases his biography starts to account for his intellectual views—and that is a mistake.¹ If we are to extract the mystical sense out of his works, then such a task is to be performed hermeneutically; i.e., this goal must be pursued through the application of textual elements and not simply through the episodes surrounding his life. In this sense, I think this is the first foray of its kind: to explain how mysticism could bind different passages of Wittgenstein's phases—spanning from the *Tractatus* all the way to the *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth, *PI*)—without specifically appealing to whole parts of his personal or private life. I want to demonstrate that the same sentiments behind the “mystical” statements found in the *TLP*—such as the following ones:

The sense of the world must lie outside the world. (TLP 6.41)

So too at death the world does not alter, but comes to an end. (TLP 6.431)

Death is not an event in life: we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in just the way in which our visual field has no limits. (TLP 6.4311)

How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is Higher. God does not reveal himself in the world. (TLP 6.432)

And more importantly yet:

It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists. (TLP 6.44)

To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical. (TLP 6.45)

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical. (TLP 6.522)

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. (TLP 7)

—are maintained throughout Wittgenstein's works. To say that Wittgenstein produces a philosophy of religion would be a far cry from what one can indeed extract from his texts, but it is undeniable that religious mystical feelings are indeed an integral part of his production. The problem, however, is how to account for his “second phase” based on this regard. As we know, in order to contrast the *TLP* to the *PI*, a separation between “the first” and “the second” Wittgenstein has been often suggested. The mystical feeling is easy to be abstracted/obtained out of the “first Wittgenstein”: both in his *Tractatus* and in his *Notebooks* (where the sketches for some of the aphorisms employed throughout the *TLP* have initially appeared), he alludes directly to such a mystical terminology. But how does one obtain that mystical outcome while looking solely at the *PI*? This is indeed a very hard demand, but I want to demonstrate that in other attempts, this task has been performed before. Now it is a matter of attaching the first and second periods together while exploring this new possibility of interpretation.

Moreover, I would like to draw attention to the fact that if I am right, the benefits of my reading would be quite intriguing. First, beyond the traditions of logicism, ordinary language philosophy, or analytic philosophy as a whole, we would also be able to understand Wittgenstein as a very influential figure for philosophical mysticism in the 20th century; maybe its most successful proponent in contemporary philosophy. This mysticism, however, would assume a different form when compared to that of his (mystic) peers; this time, in his second phase, an adequate understanding would be enough to comprehend that the mere evocation of the mystical leads to a complete miscomprehension of language, meaning, logic, and also of the “heavenly things”; so much so that it is almost as if the mere summoning of such an idea resulted in its complete annihilation. As we shall observe, therefore, that is the reason why he does not talk at all about such an aspect in his *PI*. As a matter of fact, it is a recurrent topic of discussion among scholars that mystics attempt to say what they cannot, and in spite of issuing many caveats when it comes to the discourse on those ineffable things, they talk about them, nonetheless. From this angle, Wittgenstein is an extremely consequential thinker: he does not talk about mysticism and he dissuades us from even going there; he “burns the bridge” before we can even conceive of crossing it. As it will be shown, based on the writings of J. V. Cuter (2008), solely by approaching this topic, we are led to a conflicting form of *nonsense* with the consequence of exposing ourselves to criticism while paradoxically admitting that we are not providing meaning to our language anymore. In this regard, the destruction of any form of rationality that does not participate in public language games will be complete; the logic of our language does not allow us to go outside this “public world” of ours.

Another curious result is that we could suggest that the entire mobilization of logical innovations postulated by Wittgenstein is brought forward with the finality to hover above that which no language can say, and no logic could capture. Those innovations, however, are interesting per se. Their elaborations are not subsumed under other mystical aspects. As Anscombe (1989, p. 11) points out, Wittgenstein’s abandonment of the *TLP* does not negate solid novelties advanced by his first book. As she says, much of it is still genuine: “The theory of truth functions and the use of truth tables to expound it; the conception of some things by showing, though you cannot state them; that “A thinks that p” does not state the existence of a certain relation between a person, A, and a proposition p, though its form might make you think so; that identity is not properly speaking a relation, which, as it happens, everything has to itself. One can find many examples of very useful thoughts in the *Tractatus*”. The usefulness of his thoughts could also be obviously considered by taking into account the most important contributions of his second phase: concepts such as *family resemblance*, *language games*, and *forms of life* are quite relevant and necessary for understanding philosophy to this day. Nevertheless, those concepts might also be employed to appeal to something greater that could have never fitted the pages of Wittgenstein’s books: a mystical finality, which he so much ambited and paradoxically disavowed throughout his career; something, which, in my view, is closely tied to the ethical dimension of his writings. Therefore, in what follows, I will explore Wittgenstein’s works basing myself on the existence of such a mystical element while considering that it could play the role of that continuous aspect that is so much required by Wittgensteinian scholars and specialists alike when it comes to the connection of his two most important publications. I hope that my account is of interest both for enthusiasts and academics of philosophical mysticism and for Wittgensteinian specialists as well.

2. Logical Mysticism?

Hence, *das war das Mystische* (or something like that). Although Wittgenstein does not use these exact words, his *Tractatus* nonetheless suggests that there are things that are better appreciated in silence. How troubling this silence seems to be has been a matter of endless controversies. To this day, Wittgenstein’s reasons for this *grand finale* have been widely debated and, not infrequently, his *sui generis* mystical closure generates a fair amount of criticism in academia. Below one finds Carruthers’ evaluation of this final part:

Nevertheless, since it is, in my view, clearly unnecessary to take any particular stance on the TLP doctrine of the Ethical in order to interpret and assess the semantic and metaphysical doctrines which make up the body of the work, and since my own assessment of the former is less than flattering, I have thought it best to follow Mother Rabbit's excellent advice: 'If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all.' (Carruthers 1990, p. xii)

In the end, the prevailing consensus in this regard becomes a curious one: although the author himself postulates that his book had an ethical aim, its mysticism becomes a matter of logic and most certainly not of ethics or religiosity with a finality on its own.² This evaluation, however, creates a paradox that places Wittgenstein at odds with his own views. He then becomes either an eccentric or a very weird fellow who clearly missed the control of his own writings:

In a famous letter to von Ficker [Wittgenstein] says, referring to the Tractatus, "the book's point is an ethical one". However, his remark has been ignored or simply downplayed in the intellectual climate that surrounded the work. Even as recent and as well known an interpreter as P. M. S. Hacker merely dismisses the comment, saying, "Wittgenstein's letter to von Ficker is either self-deluding, or disingenuous" ... But it does show just how strong the tide is, or was, in favor of the "purely logical" view of the Tractatus. (Hodges 1990, p. 7)

Thus, as Hodges puts it, in most cases, the *Tractatus* is understood as a book on the issue of logic—its mysticism, therefore, must be necessarily tied to such an analysis. But, in this case, how should we qualify Wittgenstein's mysticism after all? How does one extract an ethical purpose from a book on logic? How does one account for the author's opinion while, at the same time, dealing with a vast array of logical discussions, innovations, and techniques? In sum, the task of interpreting Wittgenstein is not an easy one, for one must conciliate the author's incursion in the field of logic with the unexpected mystical outburst that suddenly appears with no previous warning at the end of his book. Surprisingly, what seemed to be an austere logical treatise at first turns into a sort of *apologetic* in which the author gives the impression to be facing something like "God", the "Infinite", or the "One without name". It is this curious final excerpt that has impelled scholars and specialists alike to search for answers. In sum, the history of this interpretive endeavor to make sense of the *TLP* has mobilized many scholars while generating much stir and debate. In this regard, it is not my wish to weigh in on the discussion.³ For now, it suffices to say that there are two readings that have galvanized most of the general attention. The first one is the traditionalist view, which is tied to earlier readers of the *TLP*, many of them students of Wittgenstein himself—such as Malcolm, von Wright, Anscombe, etc. (It is also important to mention scholars who have contributed to consolidating Wittgenstein's significant position in the history of philosophy, such as G. P. Baker and, most notably, P. M. S. Hacker.) On the other side, we find those who have entitled themselves as the resolute readers, who usually come from an American-Anglophone background (although not necessarily restricted to it), with Cora Diamond, James Conant, and Michael Kremer being among their strongest exponents. In sum, depending on how the book is read, *das Mystische* is indeed the result of an inquiry that should not have taken place (that is self-defeating) or a form of illusion which is incurred when normative (logical) laws are disregarded. But, for both "parties", the common thread in understanding Wittgenstein is his preoccupation with logic—on how one makes sense with words, the subsequent establishment of meaning, and his abandonment of logical dogmatism.

Nevertheless, both interpretive communities would agree that what Wittgenstein attempts to do is to explain how language supposedly represents the world; better yet, he tries to describe what the world must be like in order to be thoroughly covered and represented by language. This time, this description will be traced from the inside, based on the limits of logic itself (*TLP* Preface). And what we shall learn through this peculiar form of inquiry is that language emulates the logical form of an ultimate reality, which is composed of simple objects that cannot be further analyzed (*TLP* 2.02–2.02331). Such

objects are the “substance” of the world, and their concatenation will account for the order of things in reality (TLP 2.01–2.0141). Language may be able to depict the world because it shares with reality a common logical feature; but what exactly such a trait looks like, we shall never know, for it can only show itself and not be said (TLP 2.171). Wittgenstein’s quest, thus, as he himself explicitly acknowledges, results to be a contradictory one—for it seems that he does try to depict language and the world from a transcendent perspective (Hodges 1990); it is almost as if by clashing against the limits of language, he then becomes able to delineate through this very same language all sorts of limits. Whether he breaks such boundaries or not, it is a matter of strong discussion. Traditionalist readers will suggest that although he is unable to put such a perspective in words, he still considers that he is able “to whistle” something about it (Hacker 2000). More recent readers, on the other side, refute such a notion. For resolute, what the author attempts to do is lure the reader to such an inadequate interpretation—and once she is there, hopefully, she will come to her senses that such an enterprise is a metaphysical endeavor which shall necessarily result in the privation of meaning; at this point, there would be a pedagogical, almost therapeutic activity: “If you follow me, I’ll bring you to the doors of your philosophical despair; learn from me”.

It is based on this perspective that the *Mystical* does not seem to create any stir. On the one hand, what is mystical is this uncanny perspective that the end of the book postulates: albeit something impossible, the author somehow believes he manages to convey the perspective of someone who is not confined to the limits of logic. His *coup de maître* in this regard was to devise a method which, in his mind, was able to do exactly what he claimed at first to be impossible (and that is also the reason why his words do not make any sense, for somehow, he has to break the rules of logic). Thus, mysticism here is the experience of stepping outside logical bounds:

[There are things that] cannot be said or indeed thought (for thought too ‘is a kind of language’)—a conception to which any doctrine of the ineffability of the mystical insight into the essence of the world or the transcendence of all that is higher must cleave. But they can be apprehended, inter alia by a grasp of the forms of what can be expressed. He did indeed think that when one has thrown away the letter, one is left with a correct logical point of view. . . (Hacker 2000, pp. 381–82)

On the other side, however, mysticism becomes the epitome of nonsense; such an inadequate perspective only comes to the fore when the determinations regarding the elaboration of meaning are disrespected, and the normativity of logic is ignored. There is no “out-side”; nothing lies beyond language. The mystical here is a trick, but still a logical one—it only emerges when one erroneously believes that one is able to step outside language:

This gives us a rough outline of Diamond’s and Conant’s account of the method of the Tractatus: the book presents us with metaphysical sentences which lead us to participate in an imaginative activity of articulating the structure of the illusion of an external standpoint on language—an imaginative activity through which we can come to recognize that illusion as an illusion. [The book] is designed to lead its reader to the recognition that certain words she is inclined to utter in philosophy fail to express anything she wants to say—to teach her “to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense”. (Crary 2000, p. 13)

But, in sum, as different as they might be, both perspectives end up being the different sides of the same coin: logic. In this case, Wittgenstein’s own assessment of his work would be hyperbole at most.

So, how can one account for Wittgenstein’s claim that his book has an ethical finality of its own? How can one comprehend the ethical mysticism that bursts forth at the end of the TLP? One possibility at this point would be to claim biographical issues associated with his personal form of mysticism: yes, there are letters in which Russell asserts that Wittgenstein became a mystic and a staunch reader of Silesius; yes, trenches and bayonets may have

influenced the atmosphere under which his book was written—several gloomy passages of his private diaries allude to this possibility; yes, there are conversations with Maurice Drury or Paul Engelmann (his friends) in which religious preferences hover above the thin air of philosophical ideas, etc. In sum, we find in Wittgenstein’s personal life plenty of material pointing in this direction and, indeed, one’s private life can never be fully dissociated from one’s actions in this world. But if we deeply inquire about his mysticism solely by taking into consideration his writings and his philosophical arguments, what can we extract out of his texts? Luckily, that was more or less presented in another article in which a full analysis concerning the TLP connection to mysticism has been offered.⁴ Consequently, for now I will recover more general parts associated with those ideas and briefly introduce them here because my goal is actually to expand and build upon those views in this new examination. First, therefore, let me start by addressing the characteristics associated with the genre of philosophical mysticism. Then, I will tie such aspects to more general considerations on the *Tractatus*.

3. Mystical Language

In philosophical mysticism, one attempts to “translate” into a coherent textual report what was experienced firsthand. Those who have undergone such an experience frequently claim that they have either contemplated or experienced the ultimate genuine form of reality or that they have witnessed the effective presence of the Divine. From this occurrence results a mysterious, insightful, and *sui generis* type of intuition—something extremely powerful, experiential, and yet distinguished from common sense experience. At this point, another characteristic associated with this episode becomes recurrent: the negativity of speech. On the one hand, nothing that the individual can claim will do justice to the phenomenon that she has just observed; on the other hand, however, she will keep speaking even if her speech could have been refrained beforehand. Moreover, her metaphorical resource will be here of an “apophatic nature”: what the description amounts to say is indescribable and inconceivable. If one understands that for every form of language a “metric” comes along with it—i.e., a form of objective or qualitative pattern allowing for different sorts of descriptions—then, one will realize that in the case of mysticism, nothing will be suitable for such an expressive necessity. Language will become solely symbolic as it will be inadequately employed in a realm where it can no longer operate; simply put, when it comes to the plunge into the Divine, no human metric will do the trick. Thus, oxymorons and superlatives will abound, and language will be hypertrophied to reach the Absolute, but the Absolute is too much for our linguistic endeavors. The mystic aims to express the “Whole”, but language is always partial. It must discriminate between items; it can never fully embrace the “One” as a whole. In this regard, what we are able to observe in such texts is that the impossibility of this endeavor plunges language into repeated pursuits. But given that this type of struggle is in vain, for its goal is never achieved, what language actually reveals are its continual efforts. Somehow, the sense of “limit” is fully expressed, for what language demonstrates at this point are its expressive limits.

This contemplation of the “Whole” also demands a singular linguistic approach. Another trait of this textual genre is that this “textual translation” of such a peculiar experience is also often recognizable for its unusual “location”—the mystic often speaks from the transcendent perspective of God Himself. But given that language now is not “language” anymore (at least not as we know and employ it), everything results in a logical paradox. On the one side, the mystic is talking about something that she experienced from a transcendent perspective (from the “Whole”); on the other, she is simply unable to describe this occurrence with any other form of accuracy whatsoever. This curious feature has also been thoroughly described in other proposals:

In those writings, the effort to affirm transcendence leads to a continuing series of retractions, a propositionally unstable and dynamic discourse in which no single statement can rest on its own as true or false, or even as meaningful. In such discourse, a rigorous

adherence to the initial logical impasse of ineffability exerts a force that transforms normal logical and semantic structures.

Performative intensity is a function of the frequency and seriousness with which the language turns back upon its own propositions. At the low end of the scale would be an assertion of ineffability, followed by a full chapter or treatise that freely employs names and predications of the transcendent, and then at the end reminds the reader that the transcendent is beyond all names and predications. At the high end of the scale of performative intensity are passages . . . in which the mystical discourse turns back relentlessly upon its own propositions and generates distinctive paradoxes that include within themselves a large number of radical transformations, particularly in the area of temporal and spatial relationships. The position taken here is that the paradoxes, aporias, and coincidences of opposites within apophatic discourse are not merely apparent contradictions. Real contradictions occur when language engages the ineffable transcendent, but these contradictions are not illogical. For the apophatic writer, the logical rule of non-contradiction functions for object entities. When the subject of discourse is a non-object and no-thing, it is not irrational that such a logic be superseded . . . Apophatic texts have suffered in a particularly acute manner from the urge to paraphrase the meaning in non-apophatic language or to fill in the open referent—to say what the text really meant to say, but didn't. (Sells 1994, p. 4)

Curiously, what is often disregarded or overlooked in more mainstream analyses becomes easily distinguishable to those familiar with the assumptions of mysticism and its language:

Wittgenstein's statement in the Tractatus that unsayable things do exist, followed by the statement that this previous statement "must be thrown away" is a classically apophatic move, but one that comes as a kind of postscript, rather than being inscribed within the Tractatus as a whole. (Sells 1994, p. 220)

Therefore, under such premises, what was Wittgenstein attempting to do? As I see it, the originality of the *Tractarian* inquiry lies in the use of the logical apparatus in order to protect a transcendent reality—which is inscrutable to human rationality and only a mystical experience can reveal—against profanation and debasement. It is almost as if Wittgenstein was providing a description of the logical scaffolding of the world so that he could delimit the things that could be said and separate them from a more elevated sentimental discovery. There is no denying that he presents a new array of technicalities and that he also explores several other logical topics to mobilize and present his ideas. Those inquiries are original and interesting per se. But if they are employed and pursued throughout the whole text that has among other things another strong and vivid motivation: to circumscribe mundane affairs in order to separate them from higher considerations; this is a typical move that is also present in other works of this same tradition. Despite my differences with Nieli's methodology, I think his analysis at this point is "spot-on":

What language shares with reality it depicts that show or manifests itself but cannot be said, is just its in-the-world structure. This structure cannot be described by language because it is a property possessed only by virtue of, and in contrast to, the out-of-the-world mystic flight—the flight (i.e., consciousness disattention, intensification, and absorption) into a sacred realm. It is this contrast.

This in-the-world structure is then identified by Wittgenstein with "logical form" and "mathematical-logical multiplicity" because logic and mathematical multiplicity represent the outer scaffolding or framework of the world which, in ekstasis, is broken out of. The both/and, either/or framework of consciousness in its attention to a multiplicitous world is transcended in the disattending flight of the mystical experience. In this "flight", logic represents the "/" in the in/out travelogue. (Nieli 1987, pp. 115–16)

As a matter of fact, we are dealing here with a confluence of two mysticisms—one of an "ethical/religious" type and another of a "logical" inclination. The *Tractarian* logic is also mystical in itself based on its opposition between the *showing* and *saying* distinction.

This distinction is, after all, based on an “unsayable” element, which acquires the status of a type of revelation. Moreover, the structure of such a logic is also ineffable—it is impossible to offer reasons for its internal articulations; we know how things are but not the reasons for it to display such an arrangement. Simply put, there are no viable arguments to defend the way things are; what Wittgenstein does is exhibit a scenario in which the rules for the expression of meaning and sense could not be set in any other way. There seems to be, however, a certain “rationality” behind it—something that, even without explanation, is still expressed behind the rules of logic.

In this type of interpretation, another point worth mentioning is that aphorism 6.54, the most polemical one, can be assimilated in its full literal meaning. There is no need to advance explanatory hypotheses accounting for the adequate interpretive background of the book; we do not have to postulate a division between “pedagogical aphorisms” and the correct framework for interpreting the theory:⁵

The ascent over the ladder alludes to the mystical ascent; the world that one sees from the height of his ascent; the world seen from outside the world (ekstasis). . . . The final statement was perhaps intended as the most serious of all, for in its counsel to silence we can see the reverence of a pious man before the divine Mysterium. (Nieli 1987, p. 118)

I see some benefits in this type of reading. The ladder here could be thrown away; in fact, the use of the ladder metaphor is almost commonplace when it comes to mystical inquiries. Furthermore, the problem of the *Tractarian* subject can also be accommodated at this point: this subject who is transcendental (or not), who disappears (or not), in the structure of the work can also be explained based on the pillars of mysticism in philosophy—the whole discussion regarding the “I” is one of the most distinguishable traits of philosophical mysticism. Another benefit is that the entire discussion regarding the logical points of the book does not affect at all the mystical spirit of this work—although what “animates” such logic, its vivacity, is in my view a mystical consideration in this sort of interpretation. In addition to that, this proposal also reverberates in Wittgenstein’s personal life and private circumstances (although the expedient of evoking things external to the book is not necessary to uphold a mystical interpretation). Such a reading also explains the reasons for Wittgenstein’s admonishment that his book had an ethical finality: the discovery of what is most sacred in life requires an adequate personal counterpart regarding the contemplation of such a revelation. In the face of the Sacred, the employment of language and reason will necessarily collapse; in the face of the Sacred, respect for the meaning of life must be applied in one’s own existence.

4. Mysticism Revisited?

I want, however, to expand upon those previous views. And I would like to start with a curious part of one of Wittgenstein’s subsequent works: his *Lecture on Ethics*. For one thing, it is clear that although Wittgenstein’s (logical) inquiries were certainly in constant change during his intermediary period, his *Lecture on Ethics* seems almost a return to previous ways of thinking especially considering the more “spiritual passages” of the *TLP*. And what happens on the *LE*? Those well-acquainted with the text will remember that Wittgenstein makes the case for the logical implausibility of ethical or religious expressions, which, paradoxically, are nonsensical sentences. But far from admonishing the speaker, what Wittgenstein exalts is the idiosyncratic nature of such expressions. Their lack of meaning is what makes them powerful; their “sense” is actually due to their “nonsensicality”:

That is to say: I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but that their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add

to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it. (LE, Wittgenstein 1965, pp. 11–12)

Thus, in sum, even if Wittgenstein's logical inquiries were changing, the point of the *LE* seems to be similar to the final aphorisms of the *TLP* in several ways: briefly put, one maintains the impression that there are things which are better understood in silence. This aspect at least would have served to show that although Wittgenstein was highly critical of his initial logical endeavors, coming even to repudiate some of his first proposals (one example here would be the logical independency of simple propositions), some parts of a more ethical tendency were preserved sounding very much like those first stipulations. Anscombe (1989, p. 8), for instance, makes it clear that in both texts the same dilemma is postulated: certain actions in the world apparently demand the necessary existence of absolute values, although nothing in the world is found to account for such a "requirement". In sum, as she puts it, life would set us a task, but "our way of executing our task cannot be given among the facts of which the world is made". Our search for adequate parameters in terms of the structuring of our actions is one of the many "burdens" of our lives; even if no definitive logical bipolar (true or false) answer can be provided, there would be nothing ludicrous in relation to this search for ethical "definitions".

In this text (*LE*), Wittgenstein states that if one were able to write a book regarding all facts of the world—those which have occurred in reality and those which we have imagined in our heads—one would come up with a complete and exact description of the world at the level of pure facts. But facts are facts—a lady being robbed and a man helping others would be on an equal footing; both cases would have been simple occurrences taking place within the world. From a purely rationalist view, a robbery and an act of volunteering are both components of the world:

But all the facts described would, as it were, stand on the same level and in the same way all propositions stand on the same level. There are no propositions which, in any absolute sense, are sublime, important, or trivial. (LE, Wittgenstein 1965, p. 6)

However, it is obvious that they cannot be on the same level in terms of the appreciation of those very same facts; it is obvious that the occurrence of someone helping another person is a positive thing, whereas someone stealing from others is a negative outcome. By this, Wittgenstein means that there must be an intrinsic valuation connected to these facts. So where do they come from? What is the source of such qualifications?

Wittgenstein then differentiates between two sorts of ethical qualifications, a "pragmatic" and an "absolute" one. In the first case, ethical evaluations are ministered based on determined parameters. The game of tennis, evoked by Wittgenstein himself, works here as a good example. Let us say that I want to determine who is a *good* tennis player and who is not. Well, in order to do just that, I have to analyze who understands adequately the rules of the game in addition to performing better during the occurrence of the matches. If Djokovic scores several points, then he is a *good* player. For his actions have a certain aim and they are well employed to achieve the objectives of the game. Here I have very clear parameters to minister ethical evaluations: *good* is someone who scores many points and knows the rules of the game. Djokovic scores many points and knows the rules of the game. Djokovic, thus, is a *good* player. In this regard, there is nothing mysterious. We have games and other types of situations; furthermore, we have parameters for such cases aiming for this or that outcome—and all we have to do is to apply adequate classifications to that which fulfills certain roles in a much more suitable way according to those same games or situations. But that is not the type of ethics which is troubling to Wittgenstein—much to the contrary. There are no imbroglios here. The problem, however, arises when it comes to the "absolute" classification and evaluation of facts. Thus, in one case, values are attributed because they have a pragmatically ridden reason to exist—they are evaluations of a certain sort based on fixed parameters. On the other hand, however, they simply exist and are "forced" upon us; we simply "recognize" them.

At this point, let us think about another example that is also suggested by Wittgenstein. Let us think about murder. As the author puts it, at the level of pure facts, “murder will be on exactly the same level as any other event, for instance the falling of a stone” (LE, p. 6), but it is obvious that murder is an act which shall be appreciated as a *bad* action. If the reader is well acquainted with literature, it would be interesting to evoke here the case of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov, the book’s main character, devises a plot to subdue and kill Alyona Ivanovna, a heinous pawnbroker and loan shark. In strict rational terms, Raskolnikov excuses himself for killing her. He is able to elaborate all sorts of justifications; but, deep down, he knows that his acts are wrong and that he must be held accountable for them. In the end, his guilt is such that he finally confesses to his crimes and accepts punishment for them. Here we have an example of the “absolute” type of evaluation—to feel inside one’s core the existence of certain inclinations that could not have been otherwise. In sum, anyone who is minimally sane knows that rape, infanticide, ethnic cleansing, etc., are all *bad* things. On the other hand, anyone who is minimally well informed also deems that forgiveness, acceptance, tolerance, etc., are all *good* things. But, once again, at the level of pure facts, at the level of trivial occurrences taking place in a mundane world, they are all at the same level. So, how does one know that certain things are *good*, whereas other things are *bad*? It is about this sort of dilemma in which Wittgenstein seems to be interested.

His answer to this case is very intriguing, to say the least. Anticipating some future concepts of his philosophy, he will come to suggest that in all of the occurrences in which we use the *good* evaluation, there is some sort of similarity (perhaps an embryo of the family resemblance concept?). Maybe we are simply applying to such a designation an image coming from the back of our minds while evoking a good day, when the skies were blue, and the weather was good. Either way, in such cases, “we seem constantly to be using similes” (LE, p. 9). But similes of *what sort* exactly? He then alludes to the fact that among the “pragmatic” examples that he has used, there must be something in common with those more “absolute” situations. And in order to illustrate what an evaluation concerning an “absolute” occasion is, he sets the case for three examples: that the world exists (i); the experience of feeling absolutely safe (ii); and the experience of feeling guilty, especially if one feels that God disapproves of one’s conduct (iii). But let us think more about items (i)–(iii).

Looking closely at such items, we might feel that they are quite peculiar, to say the least. It is easy to see that they have a religious connotation—that is, for instance, Anscombe’s approach. But there are other attempts at providing a different analysis as well. One option at this point is to offer a sort of explanation for the language employed by Wittgenstein. In recent interpretations, this is achieved by suggesting that he consciously stretches language beyond its reasonable application. This is, for instance, Kremer’s solution (Kremer 2021, p. 210), who sides with resolute readers: “It is striking that in the *Lecture*, he engaged in a reflection on ethics in which he took up two examples connected to the project he had just abandoned”. In this sort of reading, Wittgenstein’s examples are evoked by design. They are “uncomfortable” because they result from the failure to make sense of words, just like what, in this (resolute) interpretation, occurs with the *Tractatus*; in sum, in this view, items (i)–(iii) are echoes of the abandonment of a dogmatic view while marking at the same time a new stance on the workings of language.

But if we take such examples at face value, just like Anscombe did while comparing them to the end of the *TLP*, then we should ask ourselves about the reasons for his unwillingness to deal with more “universalist” or “normal” examples of absolute occurrences. He could have provided many other examples that would have been more “commonplace” and that everyone would have been compelled to accept. In sum, many examples are possible in this regard: the issue of abortion, women’s rights, ethnic cleansing, etc. On such issues, there is plenty of literature, and even today they do not seem to be “solved”. For instance, the determination that “ethnic cleansing is a *bad* occurrence” seems to me to be almost widely available in “normal” (daily societal) environments. So why does Wittgenstein bring forward such uncanny examples given that many other topics of a more daily

inclination were possible? One possible answer is that he is clearly alluding to an interplay between ethics and religion. Another possibility, however, is that he was strongly alluding to mysticism. Those three items, when transposed to the mystical religious tradition, are repeatedly mentioned in this type of literature. Once again, for those well acquainted with mysticism and its presuppositions (such as its metaphorical nature), Wittgenstein clearly had those assumptions in mind. His examples strongly resonate with *das Mystische*:

Nous pouvons donc percevoir la présence de Dieu comme une présence bienveillante; nous attribuons la bienveillance à Dieu, conçu comme une source de sentiment de sécurité. Wittgenstein (dans sa Conférence sur l'Éthique) rapporte le même genre d'expérience: celle de la « sécurité absolue ». Elle peut prendre comme forme « être en sécurité dans la main de Dieu » (c'est-à-dire ne pas pouvoir tomber) où l'anthropomorphisme de la main protectrice est une image très forte de l'ipséité. Cette main est celle de Dieu lui-même. Dire que c'est la main de Dieu, c'est dire que c'est Dieu lui-même qui protège de la chute. Il faut toutefois insister sur le fait que la perception directe de l'amour de Dieu, qui se manifeste comme une miséricorde ou une bienveillance, peut se voiler. (Nef 2018, p. 32)

Other scholars reached the same conclusion:

The mystic-ecstatic experience that forms the radiating core of the Tractatus, and the key to its interpretation, was described by Wittgenstein in a lecture on the foundations of ethics which he delivered at the invitation of a Cambridge student group shortly after his return to academic life in 1929. He describes this experience as the experience of being "absolutely safe"; it is a "state of mind in which one is inclined to say 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens' ". This experience is offered by Wittgenstein as one of three types which constitute for him personally the terminus of ethical inquiry. By ethical inquiry he understands neither a Weberian-type analysis of postulated norms or values (wertbeziehende Methode), nor a demonstration of man's dependence in ethical matters on traditions or revelations of a divine law to men of the past. Ethical inquiry for Wittgenstein is a truth seeking inquiry (much like the inquiry of Plato's Republic, one might say) which delves into "what is really important", "into the meaning of life", "into what makes life worth living". Further on in the Lecture, Wittgenstein links the absolute safety experience to religious literature, equating it with the experience of being "safe in the hands of God". Being "absolutely safe", or variations on the same theme, can be easily recognized as an expression of the mystic-flight experience in its disengagement of the self or "I" from identity with the body. (Nieli 1987, p. 91)

In this regard, I think that the *Lecture on Ethics* starts where Wittgenstein had previously left off concerning the issue of mysticism. Those three examples—items (i)–(iii)—recover the same issues that were raised at the end of the *TLP*. However, here, they are further developed. I will explain my views based on these examples.

The *TLP* results in the depreciation of the empirical will (the will that drives me to the fridge, for instance), leaving to the transcendental will—the ecstatic view of the world projected against the background of atemporality—an entire field of absolute values. From this angle, there is the possibility of drawing a division between an “authentic” and “inauthentic” life (*à la* Heidegger) when it comes to the opposition brought forward by Wittgenstein concerning the world of the happy and the unhappy ones, as he puts it (*TLP* 6.43). In any case, the mysticism of the *Tractatus* could paradoxically get rid of “mystical experiences” irrupting into the world. In an important sense of the term, this “mysticism” is the experience of the world, but the world must be taken here as a totality (as a *whole*). Therefore, every experience is either a mystical one or no experience would be mystical at all. The world, thus, already is *das Mystische*—and he is recovering such a topic once again in his *LE*. The gratuity of existence, the *esse* of existence, is one of the main ingredients when it comes to the belief in something Higher. *Someone* gives me the world.

As for being safe in the hands of God, as the previous quotations have already mentioned, it has a lot to do with the feeling of the presence of God in one's life. God, in this regard, has nothing to do with the episodes of a mundane world. The faith of the

religious individual cannot rest on the contingent facts of the world—as Kierkegaard puts brilliantly in his works, the problem is not to believe when there is evidence, but to keep one’s belief in the lack of it: “To be a favorite of fortune, is merely evidence that one is duped, because Messrs. Favorites of Fortune do not belong in the religious sphere” (CUP, Kierkegaard 1992, p. 428). The mystic, therefore, is the owner of a certainty that cannot be stripped out by the occurrences of the world; her faith is strong exactly because of that. Her religious faith is a way of looking at God’s existence as something prior to any contingency of the world. It is something presupposed in any comparison between what one says and what one believes will happen. When one has such a certainty, then one is safe in the hands of God—for whatever happens in this world, nothing will shake the foundations of one’s faith. This metaphor is a very common expression among mystics coming from a Christian background: Faith in God has saved me, and I am safe because of my certainty which lies in Him.

Lastly, we are left with the feeling of one’s guilt emerging when it comes to the evaluation that God is assessing one’s faith—or the feeling that God looks with scrutiny at one’s actions in life. To be under the eyes of God, or to feel that God holds one under His focus, is a recurrent theme in Christian literature. For instance, Rudolf Otto wrote an entire book making the case that guilt and despair arise out of the peak of the mystical flight—when one realizes to be in front of something so magnificent, so superior, that one has the impression to be marked by sin; one is insignificant in the face of God. But once that dreadful feeling starts to slowly wane, redemption takes hold. As Otto (1958, p. 37) puts it, “the hard core of such experiences in their Christian form consists of the redemption from guilt and bondage to sin”. Thus, for the mystic, she is constantly held accountable not in the face of the mundane world, but rather in front of the holy Divine. The mystic is constantly under the sight of God; a very difficult burden to endure, for she is under a heavier scrutiny when compared to the normal folks.

Otto, for instance, just like Schleiermacher before him, and even William James (in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*)⁶ many years after, proposes that usually this experience of being under the sight of God is accompanied by the release from sins. And, not infrequently, it is followed by some form of monism—when the religious individual collapses; her individuality is somehow squashed, and now she is ready to feel the whole world from the perspective of eternity. Wittgenstein does mention the sub specie aeterni perspective in his *TLP*. But does he offer hints in the sense of the experimentation with a type of monism? Even if nothing is mentioned in his *LE*, one finds in his *Notebooks* (Wittgenstein 1969) strong indications of this sort:

There really is only one world soul, which I for preference call my soul and as which alone I conceive what I call the soul of others. (NB, 23.5.15)

Only remember that the spirit of the snake, of the lion, is your spirit. For it is only from yourself that you are acquainted with spirit at all” (NB, 15.10.16)

I honestly do not know how to make sense of such passages coming from his *Notebooks* without evoking some sort of mystical religiosity behind Wittgenstein’s inquiries. I think that such excerpts also show that his mission was not uniquely logically oriented. (And it comes as no surprise that such lines tend to be massively ignored in more mainstream analyses.)

All in all, I think that now we have the tools to better understand why the dilemma concerning the “*similes*” aspect was so crucial to Wittgenstein; the truth is that this issue alludes directly to the heart of the problem. Once again, let us take a look at what he says in this regard:

For the first of them is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. A third experience of the same kind is that of feeling guilty and again this was described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct. Thus in ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be the simile for something. And if I can describe a fact by

means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense. (LE, Wittgenstein 1965, p. 10)

Thus, what Wittgenstein seems to be claiming at this point is that there must be a similarity between “pragmatic” and “absolute” occurrences. As for the “pragmatic” case, we know how to understand it—it is similar to the case of the tennis match. In other episodes, in the “absolute” ones, there must be a pattern as well, but we are simply unable to comprehend it. Notions such as *good* must be given somehow. However, to claim something of this sort would be nonsense—people would make fun of us; in philosophy, they would call us “metaphysicians”. The imbroglio here is a very clear one: someone must provide us with something—a pattern, an evaluation, or something along such lines—but to claim something of this sort is absurd, for it would amount to admitting the existence of a regulatory system coming from out of this world (maybe even admitting the figure of a Divine judge who attributes values according to some pattern which is not understandable to us). However, that would mean not doing philosophy anymore, but rather expressing religious feelings or high hopes for something that the pure analysis of language cannot provide. Either way, Wittgenstein himself acknowledges that while abiding by his own philosophy, this entire chain of thought would collapse into nonsense. The Austrian philosopher does not shy away from this fact either:

...after all what we mean by saying that an experience has absolute value is just a fact like other facts and that all it comes to is that we have not yet succeeded in finding the correct logical analysis of what we mean by our ethical and religious expressions. Now when this is urged against me I at once see clearly, as it were in a flash of light, not only that no description that I can think of would do to describe what I mean by absolute value, but that I would reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, ab initio, on the ground of its significance. (LE, Wittgenstein 1965, p. 11)

However, reading the text leads to the conclusion that the absurdity of this philosophical conundrum also represents the only way to address the issue. The answer in this regard must be a “mystical impulse”, which exhorts us to look for answers beyond the world:

For all I wanted to do with them was just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language. (LE, Wittgenstein 1965, p. 11)

Once again, Wittgenstein faces the dilemma of the mystic: to speak what he really meant to say, but could not.

5. Going Radio Silent: The Case of the *Philosophical Investigations*

One of the ideas I also would like to advance in this paper is a mystical interpretation of the *Philosophical Investigations*, but, as is often the case while dealing with any of Wittgenstein’s concepts, this is certainly no easy task. In this sense, I know of two texts that are inclined to offer an interpretation in this regard—one of them I have already mentioned: the commentary by Russell Nieli (1987). The other is a classic of South American philosophy, a text originally written in Portuguese by J. V. Cuter (2008), but which has not yet been translated into English. As the reader shall see, I will side with Cuter and will introduce his view to a broader audience while translating some passages of his work into the language used in this paper. I will, however, also present some personal insights in this regard while trying to further develop and build upon his ideas. Hence, my presentation here will be largely indebted to his proposal. But first, let me briefly address Nieli’s inquiry.

For Nieli, whose account is heavily inspired by Wittgenstein’s personal episodes, the *Philosophical Investigations* would indeed advocate for some form of therapy—however, he considers this therapy not as a metaphor related to eliminating metaphysical elaborations, but rather as a real therapy devised for serious mental problems associated with Wittgenstein’s own activity (and even possible madness). Nieli points out that certain figures of speech are explainable and acceptable when it comes to the part of Wittgenstein’s proposals

and philosophical workings. However, according to him, these terms take on a much darker and somber tone when closely examined in the context of what the philosopher is alluding to at this point—as he suggests, figures of speech used in this second period like “cramp and trouble would seem to be all right, as would therapy, but obsession seems to be somewhat overdrawn and torment and sickness would seem to be definitely out of place” (Nieli 1987, p. 204). Thus, according to Nieli, what Wittgenstein is attempting at this point is to dissolve his inner madness—which is associated with his mystical views—into some sort of public tranquility. As the American professor suggests in this regard:

In Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, the self, weary of its estrangement from society, throws itself headlong into the linguistic stream of social life, losing in the process, the inner dignity of its private sphere. (Nieli 1987, p. 239)

Thus, what Wittgenstein was trying to do at that point was to submerge his inner, private voice, in the mainstream daily talk in order to cease profound and disturbing revelations. As I have said, Nieli’s account offers a good source of citations and materials to better understand the author of both the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. His book is well written, but I do not think that it provides a satisfactory explanation for Wittgenstein’s second philosophy, which, in the case of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he deems as a *quasi*-behaviorist account of language. (I honestly do not think that an interpretation in which a philosopher is attempting to dissolve his inner, private, and personal revelations in the realm of public language—so that he will not go mad—is minimally able to do justice to the wide array of topics presented along the pages of the book.) In sum, for Nieli, the *PI* represents the abandonment of individuality and an embrace of “linguistic tribalism”—when one’s profoundest “I” is diluted while assenting to the idea that one must also accept “a sense of oneness and solidarity with the collective so that it dominates the manner in which people experience themselves” (Nieli 1987, p. 238).⁷ In sum, Wittgenstein is suggesting that lucidity can only be achieved and obtained through the public realm;⁸ almost as if he were attempting to “bury” his own mysticism while ceasing other mystical and orphic voices.

If there are any similarities between Nieli and Cuter, it is their stark refusal to accept Wittgenstein’s therapeutic method as an essentially academic occurrence. But here is where the similarities stop: if, for Nieli, this sort of therapy was a real exercise to obtain conciseness and lucidity (as if from stopping one from its descending spiral toward a lunatic asylum), for Cuter, that is certainly not the case; his analysis is much more sophisticated in this regard.⁹ For him, it is all about an exercise of asceticism that preserved the mystical pretensions of the *TLP* insofar as those could be maintained. The *PI* then becomes a sort of dialogue that is not aimed toward an external interlocutor; what one actually finds in the book is a sort of soliloquy. This so-called “therapy”, therefore, would not have as its ultimate goal the pretension of undoing misunderstandings in the academic environment; rather, it would evoke such misunderstandings in order to dissolve them as inappropriate linguistic practices while simultaneously condemning the author of such evocations to become silent about what, after the therapeutic process has taken place, she understands that she cannot talk about:

This reflection, however, is never said; it could never be. If it were said, it would become a topic for further denunciations while offering a new opportunity for the reverent exercise of silence. More than an academic event, Wittgenstein’s mature philosophy should be appreciated as a sort of calling towards that which no language can say and that, while attempting to say it, we inevitably end up profaning. My reading proposal... is, in many respects, a profanation from which... I will try, by all means, to redeem myself. (Cuter 2008, p. 220, my translation)

In sum, what he is attempting to demonstrate here is that Wittgenstein did not simply direct his attention to mistakes that could be corrected and elucidated (well, of course, one can use Wittgenstein’s second philosophy to do just that; that is for sure), but rather to topics that cannot be covered or not even addressed. The *PI*, in this regard, becomes a map

toward the “blind spots of language”. Thus, according to Cuter, the analyses presented throughout the *PI* do not have as their main goal the necessity to establish the falsity of the theses at hand, but rather to highlight their lack of sense—and that would be introduced by the systematic violation of public rules guiding language; rules that any philosophical discourse, like any other form of discourse, is obligated to adopt (Cuter 2008, p. 234).

It is in this sense that, with regard to the *PI*, an imaginary partner to the interlocutor is brought forward so that she is able to arouse a philosophical discontentment regarding a vast gamut of situations and facts. The targets here are more or less identifiable: the grammar of mental processes as well as certain mathematical idealizations. In what follows, Wittgenstein would gradually dissolve such uneasiness while simultaneously reducing his imaginary interlocutor to an unstable quietness. Her quietness is provoked by the evidence that her discursive pretensions were based on the systematic violation of rules associated with certain words of our language. (For instance, the notion regarding the word “pain” is here employed with great efficacy in order to achieve such an effect: only one knows whether one is in pain, and one is given the result that the negation of a sentence like “I know that I am in pain” does not make any sense, for it does not describe any situation at all.) The instability associated with this sort of quietness—occasioned because of the interlocutor’s attempt to express something about the world, about things, about everything that is at hand before, during, and after the therapeutic process—is an acknowledgment concerning the rules of our language. This instability, then, compels her to renew her attempts in order to express what she wanted to say before, but could not. Thus, once again, this form of therapy will reduce her to another unstable form of quietness, which will bring her to a renewed attempt and, therefore, to a new frustration (Cuter 2008, p. 235). What Cuter is exhibiting here is almost the sketch of a “spiral structure”: as if the interlocutor is circling around an unreachable point that keeps boiling up her frustration. But what is she attempting to say, anyway?

In the *TLP*, the discomfort that is hard to express accurately is tied to the internal perception of a timeless, sempiternal order of objects determining the logical space of possibilities from which our world of facts is nothing but a fortuitous and yet decisive occurrence. According to the Brazilian scholar, at this point, the anguishes evoked by the *TLP* relate to the expression of those unexplainable and unsayable conditions of possibility for the workings of logic, sense, and meaning. In the *PI*, however, there is nothing truly unsayable in this regard. As we shall see, the demand for a certain form of contemplation continues, but the case for language has changed. Language now is not the reflection of this essential and unsayable order; in this second phase, it is more like an ordinary occurrence, which is also tied to the strict domain of public rules—in brief, there is nothing essentially ineffable here as there once was with the type of mystical contemplation evoked by the *Tractatus* once the ladder was climbed. As Cuter emphasizes, language becomes a public issue in this second moment. And this demand for a public linguistic character could even be summarized in the form of a *conditional*: if there is “something” that pertains to an essentially private domain, then no rule could ever apply to this “something” as a criterion for its own applications. Applied to what we might call the internal “psychological universe”, this configuration has a singular outcome: “The rules which govern this discourse are barred from applying that to which this discourse refers as a criterion for its application” (Cuter 2008, p. 231). The results from this configuration are easy to see, especially when used in Wittgenstein’s example of the issue of pain as aforementioned—it is this understanding or this type of rule that separates the first-person perspective, unable to misunderstand one’s own pains, from a third-person perspective, who can indeed be fooled by someone else’s alleged pains. One of the interesting parts of Cuter’s theory is that this perception does not annul the possibility of a certain privacy. For him, the privacy associated with psychological states and processes is reproduced or evidenced by the asymmetry of those rules and cannot be linguistically expressed. In this regard, it is this very asymmetry of rules that acknowledges a certain privacy even without describing it:

The sentence “sensations are private” is, simply put, the translation of sentences such as “only I know that I can feel pain”, and sentences of this last type are either nonsensical (due to the fact that it does not make any sense to say that I do not know whether I am in pain, and it does not make sense either to affirm that I know that I feel them), or a tortuous statement of grammatical rules (when I respond, for instance, to the allegation that maybe I am wrong about the pains which I affirm to be feeling). In this latter case, as Wittgenstein puts it, sentences such as “sensations are private” and “only I can know whether I am in pain” are comparable to the statement that solitaire is a card game one must play alone. It is a grammar rule, not the description of a fact. (Cuter 2008, p. 231, my translation)

In order to explain his point of view, he delves deeper into the same example. He suggests that we should think about someone we consider to be physically in pain. To affirm that this individual is in pain is not simply to affirm that she demonstrates the behavior one would expect in this sort of situation. After all, someone who merely pretends to be in pain is also going to exhibit this same sort of behavior. The truth is that descriptions associated with psychological processes cannot be entirely reduced to corporeal processes. However, the criteria used to identify whether a psychological description is adequate must be found in the realm of such corporeal processes. And, as Wittgenstein makes it clear, those criteria are always located in the public domain—in sum, quoting Cuter, such criteria “are separated by a logical gap from the psychological universe to which they refer” (Cuter 2008, p. 232). Nevertheless, the upshot of this configuration is that they still guarantee the functionality of the psychological vocabulary when it comes to “the economy of our linguistic exchanges”.

Conversely, let us now engage in the exercise of supposing that something could only be identified through the application of private criteria (something with no connection whatsoever with public criteria of identification). In this case, the result would be that we would be facing something that could not be said, for it simply could not be adapted to the economy of our language games. But is there anything of this kind? To account for this hypothesis, Cuter makes the suggestion of dealing with the notion of the subject—his reader should think about an “I” who cannot be confused with any other entity. So, let us consider the “I” of Cuter. Cuter, the philosopher, just like Diamond, Kremer, or Anscombe, is someone who talks to us, and is used to behaving in a myriad of forms; in sum, he is someone who is identifiable either based on public criteria or based on a series of psychological states. But, according to Cuter, it is the “I” who undergoes such processes—and it is this same “I” that philosophy identifies as the bearer of such processes, or, as he puts it, the “special scope of phenomena” which is contrasted to the external world of external things. If this “I of the I’s”, bearer of all phenomena (what Cuter dubs as “thinking enclosure”) truly existed, then it would be set apart from any possibility of identification while applying that same public criteria. Furthermore, any possible occurrence would be completely neutral with regard to that “entity”. This can be observed while judging someone else’s behavior when he or she claims to be in pain, for there are publicly available criteria that allow us to evaluate this individual’s behavior. In the case of the “I”—that is, in my own case—however, I can express my pain, or pretend that I have it, and even say that I am well. But it is impossible for me to question whether I am in pain or, alternatively, to ignore whether I am pretending to be in pain. Briefly put, Cuter is making the case here for the exclusion of a certain type of question which surrounds the topic of the “I”. If the “I of the I’s” truly exists, then she does not play any role in the linguistic process; in a certain way, this “I” is linguistically inaccessible: propositions attempting to access this sphere are either nonsensical or disguised grammar assertions (Cuter 2008, p. 234).

In the end, what Wittgenstein makes us face is that in certain specific (philosophical) analyses, the attempt to go beyond the possibilities of sense, of crossing the line of linguistic limits, is radically reduced to some form of nonsense; for instance, it is nonsense (maybe even absurd) the attempt to employ private language criteria. But here is where we also locate one of the many climaxes associated with Cuter’s theory: for him, unlike in

more mainstream analyses, Wittgenstein's lessons do not have as their ultimate goal the determination of the falsity concerning the academic theses thoroughly examined in the *PI*, but rather "their lack of meaning which presents itself in the form of the systematic violation of the public rules that govern the language that philosophical speech, just like any other form of speech, is obligated to employ" (Cuter 2008, p. 234). What happens, thus, is that a certain limitation is introduced to this or any language, which is expressed in the necessity of public criteria when it comes to the evaluation of those rules governing speech. Equally important would be that Wittgenstein's theory is not committed to "the inexistence of entities that evade the possibility of an insertion in the economy of our linguistic exchanges" (Cuter 2008, p. 234); if it were, it would be as nonsensical as the theses it was trying to debunk. As Cuter also notes, and also in comparison to the *TLP*, on those things that could not have been said, nothing can be said, starting with their own ineffability. In this case, what can indeed be said is that while one attempted to express certain notions, one violated such and such rules much like children when they misplay the pieces of chess or the cards of a game. Another culmination of Cuter's philosophy is that by accepting what he is suggesting, one also comes to the perception that while pointing to the mistake of our interlocutor's grammar, the thesis that she could advance is reduced to silence, but we "neither say, nor could we say, anything about the existence of unsayable entities"; what we could do at most is "to invite our interlocutor to face this existence in a legitimate and unobjectionable way: to contemplate it without saying anything" (Cuter 2008, p. 234). Cuter does not shy away from the fact that this invitation could never be made, mostly because the notion of "contemplation" is tied to public criteria, which would be absent from the start in this case. (Thus, it is indeed a form of contemplation reminiscent of the *Tractatus*, albeit a most special one.) But, according to him, it is this structure which reveals the book to be a soliloquy; for the reader starts to feel in her bones the recurrence of a certain question, which seems to secure once again the foundations of a solipsist ontology—however, the cogency of the answer to this question undoes the pretension of the "grammaticality" of the question at hand. What one obtains after this therapeutic process is a form of silence that is attentive to the limits of language, which must obey the strict domain of public rules of correction. According to Cuter, it is at this point where mysticism appears. I quote him below:

Based on that, the anguish of talking about that which cannot be said ceases; in this regard, a new possibility opens up—but just a possibility—in relation to a silent contact with the raw elements of life, a solitary adventure that takes place behind our eyes and no language could ever have the pretension to describe. At least in my case, that is how the Wittgensteinian therapy reverberated. Far from turning me away from that which is called as the "mystery of existence", this therapy actually magnified it while simultaneously humiliating the pretensions of language and leaving me alone, without discourses or arguments, in front of a deeply uncanny and mysterious spectacle—the experience, so to speak, associated with the being's existence instead of nothingness --, something that lies at the origin, if I am not mistaken, of every authentic mystical experience. Of course, I could try to describe such an experience by saying, for instance, that in such moments I feel like a point without extension in the face of the infinite or other things like that. Quickly, however, I would remind myself that none of that describes anything, and that this attempt at obtaining a form of expression would only resettle me in the scope of a senseless diaphony, which, instead of bringing me closer to the truth, would only push me further away from sense. I return, then, to silence, and I bring language back to the realm for which it was born and created. (Cuter 2008, p. 236, my translation)

The interesting part of this interpretation is that it does not require an "ontological counterpart" concerning the falsity of the theses at hand. In this type of argument, the Austrian philosopher is not worried about dispelling fake ontologies or localizing "mistakes" as if he could point them out and say: "There is a mistake!" What he is actually doing is evincing that certain proposals cannot be the case, for they simply do not respect the rules that the publicity of criteria demands. That is not to say that certain discomforts are

fully annihilated; the anguish of approaching certain topics or speaking on certain issues is there at each renewed attempt. It is only that its bearer learns at each time to silence her own desire to speak on certain affairs, for she will realize that each attempt is absolutely fruitless in order to articulate what troubles her. At this point, we could even trace a point of similarity to the case of the patient visiting her psychologist's cabinet: even though she is eventually discharged and her worries dissipated, her anguish and challenges never cease; she learns to live them through while acknowledging at the same time that what troubles her cannot stop her, but, nonetheless, her anguishes are part of her and even when "fought against" it will not cease.

6. Mysticism(s): Concluding Remarks

Thus, it should be understood that mysticism also plays a significant role in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, but this has rarely been understood or properly addressed. My view, therefore, is that Wittgenstein's later philosophy is an exercise in terms of a self-denial, and almost a peculiar kind of confession,¹⁰ which preserved the mystical aspirations of the *Tractatus* as long as they could be maintained. That is also the reason why this later philosophy does not take the form of an exposition oriented toward an external interlocutor—thus, the PI should be assimilated as a (confessional) soliloquy. And this "philosophical therapy", which is often presented, would not have as its ultimate goal the pretense of undoing misunderstandings by condemning the author of "misplaced statements" to silence. In fact, there would be something even greater behind this composition, which, for obvious reasons, could not be said but should be rather experienced: more than an academic effort, Wittgenstein's mature philosophy should be understood as a kind of gravitation toward the contemplation of that which no language could ever say. And the most typical of these items is to be located in this "I of the I's", an ineffable sort of interiority, which should not be confused with the empirical subjectivity that one is certainly capable of describing on the basis of language games. This configuration evinces the mystical, for one cannot affirm one's own singularity (the appropriation of one's own being) without violating the public criteria associated with the institution of meaning in language. Therefore, faced with a unique discovery, one must remain silent and not succumb to the desire to express the inexpressible. More than dispelling illusions, it is also an invitation to contemplate that which is totally ineffable. We must note, however, that the price to pay here is extremely high: there is no room in Wittgenstein's philosophy for topics that are undeniably important to human experience: such as the appropriation of one's own being (i), death (ii), empathy (iii), etc. On very important topics, we must pass over in silence. (I often wonder whether Heidegger's *Dasein*, for example, should not be considered an attempt to develop an "ad hoc language game" to deal with those same questions, albeit in a completely different way. I also wonder whether the contemporary philosophy of language has not been led astray by deviating from Wittgenstein's attempt to shed light on the asymmetry of linguistic rules, which allow the existence of the public sense while turning internal investigations into absurd—or impossible—endeavors.)

One could even suggest that this view, which is very much indebted to Custer's analysis, is very far-fetched or romanticized. (Or even that this is a clear violation of what Wittgenstein postulates; indeed, if one takes the *PI* to be a manual on how to dispel metaphysical illusions for the greater benefit of analytic philosophy, then many of my mystical claims will be criticized; if the sense of therapy alluded here should be circumscribed to that which vanishes or is dispelled within the internal economy of language games, then I must pay the price and assume to practice an "extreme" reading of Wittgenstein.) However, there are good reasons to suppose that the Austrian philosopher did have indeed something of this sort in mind, for in addition to this "I of the I's", there is another aspect that appears to indicate a sense of continuity in this regard: the uninterrupted marvel in relation to the existence of the world, a feeling which seems to lie at the basis of every religious manifestation. Throughout much of his work, this feeling does not change:

It is not how the world is that is mystical, but rather that it is. (TLP 6.44)

And I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle. (LE, Wittgenstein 1965, p. 11)

And although Wittgenstein is criticizing one of the passages developed by William James (who probably wrote the most famous book on the issue of mysticism) in his *Principles of Psychology*, it is curious to notice that the problem of the existence of the world comes forward once again:

William James, in order to show that thought is possible without speech, quotes the reminiscences of a deaf-mute, Mr Ballard, who wrote that in his early youth, even before he could speak, he had had thoughts about God and the world.—What could that mean!?!—Ballard writes: “It was during those delightful rides, some two or three years before my initiation into the rudiments of written language, that I began to ask myself the question: how came the world into being?”—Are you sure—one would like to ask—that this is the correct translation of your wordless thoughts into words? And why does this question—which otherwise seems not to exist—arise here? Do I want to say that the writer’s memory deceives him?—I don’t even know if I’d say that. These recollections are a strange memory phenomenon—and I don’t know what conclusions one can draw from them about the narrator’s past! (PI, § 342)

As can be observed, this *Mysterium* of an unexplained existence is closely associated with the developments of religion. That is why the necessity for a Creator in religious terms becomes so fundamental. Perhaps if one dedicates something to the glory of God, one is actually alluding to this feeling; one is thanking God for one’s existence:

This book is written for such men as are in sympathy with its spirit. This spirit is different from the one which informs the vast stream of European and American civilization in which all of us stand. That spirit expresses itself in an onwards movement, in building ever larger and more complicated structures; the other in striving after clarity and perspicuity in no matter what structure. The first tries to grasp the world by way of its periphery—in its variety; the second at its centre—in its essence. And so the first adds one construction to another, moving on and up, as it were, from one stage to the next, while the other remains where it is and what it tries to grasp is always the same. I would like to say ‘This book is written to the glory of God’, but nowadays that would be chicanery, that is, it would not be rightly understood. It means the book is written in good will, and in so far as it is not so written, but out of vanity, etc., the author would wish to see it condemned. He cannot free it of these impurities further than he himself is free of them. (PR, Wittgenstein 1975, Preface)

Briefly put, Wittgenstein never lost his impetus toward the mystical, but he did annihilate any sort of pretension to mention it. The “blind spots of language”, which include the marvel at the world’s existence, point in this direction.

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Notes

- ¹ Russell Nieli, highly influenced by K.T. Fann (and his *Wittgenstein: An Introduction*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1971), has probably developed the first and best “mystical commentary” on Wittgenstein’s work up to this date. However, I firmly disagree with him when it comes to his analysis of the *Philosophical Investigations* as we shall see. Another issue is that he strongly appeals to extratextual elements (mostly associated with Wittgenstein’s personal life) in order to explain several textual passages, something that I aim to avoid. It is also worth mentioning that the reception of his work was an “unfortunate” one. He released his book right before the beginning of Cora Diamond’s attack on the traditionalist views of the *TLP* and the likes of P.M.S Hacker. In this sense, right after its release, his work was not “new”, as it did not address the “issue of the moment”. In addition to that, his views are too perennialist—by that, I mean that he takes mysticism to be a universalist sort of experience, almost pre-cognitive and non-referential. After the writings of Steven T. Katz, it is hard to uphold such views. (Katz did indeed provide a devastating critique of Nieli’s book by the time of its release.) I do think that both “problems” could be addressed; they do not land a fatal blow to the main idea behind his analysis. Nieli, however, never dealt with both issues. Shortly after, he also “retired” from the field and did not continue his research on Wittgenstein.
- ² However, it is important to mention that there have been interesting initiatives to assuage such a strict configuration coming from different sides of current Wittgensteinian interpretive tendencies. In the “traditionalist corner”, Hodges’ *Transcendence and Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*’ is a good example of this fact. In the “resolute side”, one should mention Marie McGinn’s *Elucidating the Tractatus* or even *Wittgenstein’s Moral Thought*, a book edited by Reshef Adam-Segal and Edmund Dain.
- ³ For those interested in such a history, I would strongly recommend Bronzo’s (2012).
- ⁴ For more, I suggest Lima’s (2023, n°25. pp. 50–66).
- ⁵ For more on this type of critique, I suggest looking at Engelmann (2018, n° 140. pp. 591–611).
- ⁶ A book that Wittgenstein knew quite well and tended to praise.
- ⁷ I have slightly adapted the quotation.
- ⁸ Nieli also alludes to some similarities akin to the Heideggerian project. In this regard, it is almost as if the *Wittgensteinian* linguistic subject abandons his solitude to make sense of the world with others (*in der Welt sein mit den Anderen*).
- ⁹ From here on, I will follow Cuter’s ideas very closely. The next paragraphs are entirely based on his writings.
- ¹⁰ In this sense, it is not surprising that he begins his work by quoting Augustine.

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Article

Wounds and One-Ing: How a “Creative–Critical” Methodology Formed Fresh Insights in the Study of Julian of Norwich, Voicing Her Christian Mysticism Today

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Abstract: Post-Theoretical “creative–critical” research recently emerged in the discipline of Creative Writing as a collapse of the binaries between practice and Theory. This article shows that using this interdisciplinary methodology in the study of mysticism is a natural fit, illustrating its efficacy in a case study with the reflexive writing of the medieval Christian mystic Julian of Norwich. As a creative–critical writer and researcher, I explored the junctures where Julian’s poetics intersect with trauma-informed theology. Writing through these intersections formed a literary trauma-informed framework for the holding and processing of loss and grief through Julian’s nuanced modelling of mystical union with God. This case study shows how the framework came together critically and its application to contemporary ecological grief in the writing of a performative long poem, *Blue: a lament for the sea*. The “theopoetic” making process with two images from Julian’s texts, Christ’s “wounds” and “one-ing”, developed new language for liminal and spiritual experience. Insights from creative–critical research can be shared in artistic performance and publication in the academy and beyond in public impact. Bringing the whole self through theopoetics to the scholarly research of mysticism has the potential to form fresh insights, revealing new dimensions.

Keywords: Julian of Norwich; mysticism; contemplative; creative–critical; poetry; theopoetics; eco-anxiety; ecological crisis; practical theology; post-theory

1. Introduction

“To be a theologian, one has to be a non-theologian” (Holland 1997). This quote by Paul Tillich suggests that theology can benefit from methodologies and research that intersect with other disciplines in the academy. This article aims to show that interdisciplinary “creative–critical” practice research can bring a new direction to the study of mysticism in the context of practical theology, generating insights that may otherwise remain “overlooked or undiscovered by more conventional research methodologies” (Crewe 2021). Furthermore, creative literary forms can naturally provide channels for research to achieve public impact through their publication and performance, bridging the academic–public gap. Through such channels, practice-led research can embody public impact, as defined by the UK Research Excellence Framework (Crewe 2021).

In this case, creative–critical practice research involved applying both critical logical and creative associative thinking to Julian of Norwich, a medieval contemplative anchoress, as part of a larger doctoral project. My “theopoetic” writing process with Julian’s texts in Middle English illuminated a small trail of academic meeting points of her theology with trauma-informed theology. I found that writing through these intersections formed

a trauma-informed cognitive framework for the sensitive holding and processing of loss and grief through Julian's nuanced modelling of mystical union with God. The theopoetic process generated new language in the writing of a free verse narrative, *Blue: a lament for the sea*¹, which applies the framework to the specific context of contemporary ecological grief.

Recent research carried out in Finland on the phenomena of ecological grief shows that difficulty in engaging with the complex reality of climate and ecological breakdown is causing stasis for individuals, cultures and systems when there is an urgent need for climate action. Stasis and denial are as political as they are personal. *Blue: a lament for the sea* shows that poetry can subtly articulate this trauma-informed academic framework using Julian's theology for holding complex reality, loss and grief and may help by disrupting the "paralyzing" and "silencing" effects of unprocessed eco-anxiety (Pihkala 2018). The reader or audience can travel along with the narrator and share in voicing their ecological grief through the tonal shifts and narrative. By journeying along with the narrative, the reader or audience is invited to share in the complexity of bearing witness to ecological harm and its impacts while being complicit in its destruction; a mystical one-ing of divine love with suffering; and the concluding contemplative action of thinking with our hearts and acting with our hearts.

Performing *Blue: a lament for the sea* at academic conferences, together with presenting critical papers on its development, brought these research insights into knowledge exchange with peers at the Mystical Theology Network 2024, International Medieval Congress 2024 and Yale Graduate Conference in Religion and Ecology 2023. In 2022, I performed the first version at a public arts festival, Hidden Door, in Edinburgh, UK. In 2025, its publication as a pamphlet by a traditional poetry press will give the research insights wider public impact. I have already been invited by organisations such as the Iona Community in 2025 to perform the poem and lead discussions and writing workshops, increasing its impact.

This project encompasses adjacent disciplines and may be of interest to diverse audiences with overlapping interest: scholars of theology and practical theology, psychology and medieval literature, as well as literary fiction readers. Section 2 of this article outlines my methodology: creative–critical research and the relevance of poetry to mysticism. Section 3 offers a critical understanding of Julian of Norwich's paradoxical engagement with the body and the "wound", trauma-informed theology and ecological grief. Section 4 explores how *Blue: a lament for the sea* was written through the "wound" and "one-ing": the theopoetics process.

2. Methodology: Poetry as a Way of Knowing

Writing as a researcher, the poetic, even the theopoetic, enables new insights to coalesce and form. My creative–critical methodology eschews the binary often perceived between critical and creative thought and embraces the poetic for its ability to express reason, thought and emotion.

Creative–critical research emerged as a Post-Theoretical collapse of the binaries between Creative Practice and Critical Theory in Creative Writing (Smith 2022). In this way, Creative Writing is an "exemplary discipline of the post-Theory Academy" with the capacity to challenge hegemonies and build critical awareness of social contexts (Dawson 2022).

The Nigerian British poet, essayist and hybrid writer Ben Okri (2018) asserts that, of all the literary forms, poetry can disrupt perceptions and be the "arrow that sends the shaft of the political into the heart". By "revealing other realities. . . awakening an unease about the world", poetry can reconstitute "humanity into the possibility of grace". Okri goes further and explicitly aligns poetry with mysticism. Poetry "sings to the sublimity of what appears not to be us but which also appears to be us in unknown ways. Poetry is primarily mystical in that sense".

Just as light can seem both dawn and dusk, poetry can invoke liminal, in-between space in the reader or listener. There is a natural affinity between poetry and contemplative faith. In the refusal of separations, dualisms and oppositions, both can frame complex realities and help us bear witness to that complexity, expand our sense of the possible and strengthen our capacity to live with paradox. Taking the cognitivist assumption that art can give us philosophical knowledge (Gaut 2013), the poem, as with mystical contemplative thought, can provide a generative place for holding uncertainty with curiosity. Uncertainty, understood as the ability to let in more of reality and hold open possible meanings or conclusions, enables cognitive reframing, innovation and change (Crewe 2021); this is the process through which *Blue: a lament for the sea* may support people to process their ecological grief, letting go of a previous posture and opening to a new possibility. Poetry's holding of uncertainty, with an undefended openness to liminality, can also open us to the divine (Fosse et al. 2024).

The “theopoetics” movement is firmly located in Post-Theory, embracing the understanding that no writing or reading is ideologically innocent². Developing at the site of the divide between the sacred and secular, theopoetics is a form of political resistance (Walton 2019). Associated with process theology and liberation theology, by bearing witness to injustice, it is concerned with bringing about social justice in the world. Theopoetics attends to embodiment and the aesthetic and cognitive uncertainties of language in making meaning (L. Callid Keefe-Perry et al. 2014, p. 111). It is an invitation to work with God as poet of the world (Faber 2008), helping new possibilities come into being as we write new endings and fresh starts, using our imagination to expand our collective semantic space.

Poetry and theopoetics, therefore, naturally support a constructive theological response to oppressive hegemonic structures, such as those operating around climate denial. If I may amplify Mark's Gospel 16.17, perhaps the desire to dismantle the evil of injustice is why we seek new language; it is why we speak in new tongues. This is true even more so when the voiceless are not just the marginalised and vulnerable in human society but voiceless non-human nature.

3. Key Strands of Critical Research

3.1. One-Ing Material Reality with Divine Love

“For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the fleshe in the skinne, and the bones in the flesh, and the harte in the bowke, so ar we, soule and body, cladde and enclosedde in the goodnes of God”. (Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love* 6.35–37, Ed by Watson and Jenkins 2006).

For Julian of Norwich, it was during a traumatic near-death experience in May 1373 that she experienced a series of “showings”, when she was “thirty years and a half”. The cause of her illness is unknown; it is thought that she may have contracted the black plague or suffered a miscarriage. As Julian came close to death, the priest administered the last rites and affixed a crucifix to the foot of her bed when showings of the crucified Christ commenced. Julian recovered and went on to write *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* (henceforth, *A Vision*), became an anchoress, adopting the male saint's name of the church adjoining her anchorage, and wrote the longer text, *A Revelation of Love* (henceforth, *A Revelation*). She died sometime after 1416.

To Julian, all material reality is precious and upheld in love, contrary to the tradition of her time which considered the flesh to be innately corrupting. Julian directs her medieval reader to perceive the bodily senses as places of somatic encounter with God. She holds a little thing like a hazelnut in her palm, symbolizing all of creation (*A Revelation*, 5:7). Great drops of Christ's blood are likened to “pellotes” (*A Revelation*, 7.11), evoking stones, cannonballs or chunks of meat. The drops of blood are re-imagined as raindrops from the

eaves of a roof after a great shower of rain and as shining herring scales spreading across Christ's forehead (*A Revelation*, 7.17–23). Her language is rooted in “homely”, everyday images of material reality.

Medieval female mystics engaged with the divine through a corporeal framework, enabled by a God who was corporeally incarnated in Christ (Robertson 2008)³. Julian's low status as an abject⁴ medieval woman bearing witness to Christ's wounds from the Passion engenders a paradoxical healing of her own “wounds” of trauma, in a mystical one-ing with God's love⁵. Although the extent of Julian's gender essentialism is debated, there is academic consensus regarding Julian's paradoxical interlacing of previously abject material with the mystical. Julian's “positive body theology” reclaims the body, intersecting with the apophatic, using deliberately paradoxical and open-ended language, transforming homely images to “gateways into the apophatic” (Greenaway-Clarke 2021). The cataphatic–apophatic pulse in Julian's theology creates a porosity through which the reader can bring the whole self to her text and encounter God.

The precise points of access to the divine in Julian's theology are Christ's wounds. His wounds are portrayed as dynamic and almost sentient. For example, the “woundes waxid wide” (*A Revelation*, 17.8), as “the blessed woundes of oure saviour be open and enjoye to hele us” (*A Revelation*, 61.54). His wounds bleed copiously throughout Julian's texts.

“And this ranne so plenteouslye to my sight/that methought, if it hadde bene so in kinde for that time, it shulde hafe made the/bedde alle on blode, and hafe passede on aboute”. (*A Vision*, 8.22–24).

Blood in the Middle Ages was believed to be a transmutable substance that could change into another entity. Throughout Julian's writing, Christ's blood and wounds are agents of change.

3.2. Trauma-Informed Theology: Bearing Witness to the Wound

The word trauma is derived from the Greek word for “wound”, τραῦμα. Using the wound as metaphor for visible and invisible traumatic harm is an ancient tradition. As the prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures laments,

“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, ‘Peace, peace,’
when there is no peace.” (Jeremiah, 6.14 New Revised Standard Catholic Edition)

Significantly, neurobiological research shows that trauma remains stored in the body and is not mentally processed like other forms of suffering (Van der Kolk 2014). In the original traumatic event, one cannot protect oneself from a terrifying “axial moment”; the self is annihilated and is indistinct from the trauma (Finley 2015). In this moment of nervous system overwhelm, the body unconsciously instantly enters a state of freeze, flight, fight or fawn (Haines and Standing 2015). Thereafter, held in the body, trauma becomes the unseen, untended wound that without intervention cannot close and can be physiologically reactivated in a horrifying eternal present of recurrence (Rambo 2021). Yet, contemporary embodied therapies in multiple studies are shown to mitigate the impact of trauma, enabling the healthy integration of the past (Haines and Standing 2015). This is not recovery as in recovering a previous innocence but as in a healing transfiguration. There is a qualitative difference; we are changed by the events of life.

As part of this healing, in a reversal of the annihilation of the self, the survivor may need others in their community to sensitively bear witness to their wounds of trauma. Yet, this is often problematic, for a variety of reasons. Some faith communities with triumphal redemption narratives can elide trauma and its recurring effects. Such cultures disallow complexity and can reinforce the shaming annihilation that the victim has already

experienced. A person can stay consciously or unconsciously trapped in their wounded self. The compounding of trauma in faith communities is a form of spiritual abuse, even religious trauma (Ramler 2023) (O'Donnell and Cross 2022). By contrast, trauma-informed theologies fully engage with trauma research and lived experience. Trauma theologies work with complex suffering and loss to support healthy integration within the self. Significantly for the argument of this article, at a community level, trauma theologies support healthy engagement with trauma survivors in bearing witness to their wounds. Bearing witness is costly work: others need to be willing to be changed by this encounter. People may resist this for numerous reasons. Commonly, the victim or survivor's life experiences may threaten another person's understanding of God. Without a willingness to be affected by another's suffering, let alone bring about change, the circumstances or system that caused the original event can and often do recur. This is where trauma-informed theology supports the whole community to safely engage with suffering and be changed by it. When love meets suffering it changes into mercy, and mercy becomes action.

Professor Willie James Jennings shows how bearing witness is modelled by Christ in body and behaviour in John's Gospel, chapter 20, following the resurrection. Jesus appears to his disciples and invites them without shaming or condemnation to touch his still-present bodily wounds: the disciples encounter Christ's and their own suffering and their failure to prevent his death or to stay present at the crucifixion (Jennings 2016). This models a healthy integration of the past with learning. In a response to Jennings, Professor Shelly Rambo (2021) at Boston University, the leading theologian working in trauma today, reinforces the model in John 20: Jesus shows us how to bear witness to all wounds, visible and invisible, and bearing witness can engender change. Jennings' and Rambo's reading of John 20 echoes Julian of Norwich's approach to Christ's wounds as the place of crossing to integration and wholeness. In this remarkable resonance, Julian's theology intersects with trauma theology.

In further resonance, Rambo observes that Julian of Norwich's portrayal of a compassionate God in her "Lord and Servant" parable (*A Revelation*, 51) does not blame or shame humans for their suffering, providing "a wedge between sin and suffering that is very helpful for those who experience trauma" (Rambo 2019, p. 24). For faith communities with trauma-informed theologies, engaging with a God of profound compassion, love and mercy who does not shame and blame releases people from the mechanisms that might impede contrition and cultural change.

As we have seen, blood in the Middle Ages was believed to be a transmutable substance that could change into another entity. Julian lingers on Christ's blood and wounds as agents of change. When the moral order of wrongdoing is not negated, and when wounds are neither valorised nor elided, wounds can be transfigured, according to Jennings, Rambo and Julian of Norwich.

Today the bodily self that was made abject in trauma, and by storing trauma in the body thereafter, and made abject again in trauma recurrence, can be profoundly met by Julian's positive body theology as it intersects with contemporary trauma-informed theology. Held in divine love, harm can lead to healing.

John's Gospel, quoted above, is the only gospel to use the metaphor of Christ as a lamb. The book of Revelation, possibly by the same author, depicts the Lamb in heaven with open wounds as if Christ continues to hurt with the hurting in all creation. In deep time, in quantum entanglement, Christ's wounds will not close until we all heal⁶, including suffering in nature: all is mirrored by Christ. This poetic theological thought subtly informs the narrative of *Blue: a lament for the sea*.

3.3. Entwining the Strands with the Ecological Crisis

Professor Panu Pihkala of the University of Helsinki, in his 2018 article, “Eco-Anxiety, Tragedy, and Hope: Psychological and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change”, wrote that ecological grief is a “moral emotion”. Rarely clinical, it is a perfectly normal response to existential threat, both imminent and in the future. He found that when ecological anxiety is left unprocessed in the unconscious mind, it has a paralyzing effect on the person and on society. There is socially constructed silence about the climate emergency which is causing “severe and pervasive apathy”, stifling action in response. In addition, Pihkala reports on work between natural scientists and theologians in Finland to help people process their eco-anxiety.

I notice a similarity in my own faith communities between the denial and elision of the wounds of trauma and denial and elision of ecological suffering, where the suffering and complexity is too much, threatening their understanding of reality and disturbing an illusory communal sense of safety and protection. Denial and elision are tragic responses, even more tragic on a planetary scale, particularly given that denial of suffering is not the behaviour modelled by Jesus Christ in John 20.

Tim Middleton, a postdoctoral researcher at Oxford University, brings trauma theology together with eco-theology for the ecological realm, specifically the human failure to bear witness to suffering in the ecosphere. Middleton refers to Shelly Rambo’s work, claiming that Christ in the crucifixion refused to abandon the wounded world and exemplified bearing witness to and remaining with suffering. Middleton argues that perceiving ecological suffering through the lens of trauma brings the suffering to sight and that bearing witness “dignifies” past suffering in the hope of preventing future violence against nature. Humans bearing witness to ecological wounds engenders a communication that is not otherwise possible. The use of the language of trauma is not an attempt to portray nature as a conscious entity; rather, it is a deliberate anthropomorphising of nature with the structures of trauma to support human engagement and an integrated response (Middleton 2022).

The author and scholar Claire Gilbert writes in *Julian of Norwich and the Ecological Crisis: Restoring Porosity* that Julian’s theology can help society in a change in consciousness. Gilbert does not refer to trauma theology but still finds enough evidence in Julian’s theology alone to support engagement with the ecological crisis. Culture needs an ecological consciousness born of porosity learned from Julian. Porosity here is defined as an undefended openness to pain, to contrition, to love and to joy. Modelling Julian’s porosity of consciousness would let us recover a renewed sense of the sacrality of nature, of which we are a part (Gilbert 2024).

An undefended openness to brokenness can lead to lament. Calling reality as it is, lament, is key to healing, writes Cole Arthur Riley in her New York Times bestseller *This Here Flesh*. We can journey into our deepest sorrows knowing that tragedy does not own us because lament insists that things need not be like this: another reality should be possible (Riley 2022). Significantly, Riley celebrates Julian of Norwich for not eliding the terror of her own illness and trauma which formed her theology. In her writing, Julian fully bears witness to suffering, her own and Christ’s.

4. Theopoetics: *Blue: A Lament for the Sea*

4.1. Bearing Witness

All the strands discussed in Section 3 come together through *Blue: a lament for the sea*, animating Julian’s theology at these points of intersection. We need to bear witness to a hugely complex reality. Bearing witness to the suffering caused by the ecological wounds we are complicit in causing supports us to care enough to make vital change in our behaviours and systems: this is the subtext of *Blue: a lament for the sea*. Critically

understood, engaging with this trauma-informed theological framework may bring about a cognitive reframing—an imagining otherwise—that may lead to change.

The inspiration to write the long poem occurred while reading of a Scottish Gaelic medieval “prophecy” in the apocalyptic tradition about the sacred Isle of Iona, which foretells a devastating sea flood at the end of time above which Iona shall arise. Bringing this together with the rising seas of the Anthropocene formed the catalyst for the poem. Written in free verse⁷, *Blue: a lament for the sea* is one woman’s poetic vision of a journey through ecological grief as she steps into the waves around Iona and is almost swept away, while the audience or readers are immersed in a surreal flooding landscape⁸ that mystically responds to her lament.

All the critical understanding of trauma and bearing witness explored in the second section of this article is expressed simply through use of the “wound” metaphor. At first in the poem, the focus is on human wounds and the medieval tradition of pilgrimage to Iona in search of healing:

“when the hurting followed,
bearing heart-wounds few can see,
the harper plucked the air
with a tune so sad, birds shut their beaks
and fish in the sea stopped to listen”

As the 2300-word lament unfolds, the narrator mourns ecological breakdown in a visceral, personal way. The metaphor of the wound extends, growing into a call for the audience or reader to bear witness. Bearing witness to wounds as a moral imperative becomes the crossing point to transfiguration.

“Let the wounds surface, she cries
let the wounds be seen
it is the only way to stop the breaking...
when will we see what we do?”

Unsaid throughout is the understanding that most of us do not witness the ecological consequences of our individual and collective behaviour. Subtly, the narrator models a porous bearing witness to the suffering. With lament at its heart, the poem suggests that whatever good we may perform does not reverse the moral order: it does not mitigate the losses that have already occurred in the poly-crisis.

“How will it be when the great deep falls quiet,
the oceans poisoned,
the seabed—a catacomb of coral,
the birthing place—a rattletrap boneyard,
beaches swept into memory
the last bird with tired wings shrieking a lonely cry across empty waves,
an echo of all the birdsong that ever stitched the air”

Following Cole Arthur Riley and Julian of Norwich, lament leads to contrition. Through the poetry, overflowing tears of sorrow are conflated with the rising oceans and with winter melt from the polar regions.

“Tears splash into water: salt tears
swell the seas
and now they arise at so much loss

... for we cast our brokenness into the seas
and now they flood
with endless winter sorrow"

The lamenting process in the poem involves grieving reality as it is seen and experienced, with hope conveyed not as a positive feeling but through the possibility of change.

"our grief changes nothing
but sorrow may bring a seeing, a turning"

Blue: a lament for the sea models Julian's engagement with Christ's suffering through an overwhelming love for creaturely life as homely material reality. An undefended porous consciousness becomes animated through the narrative in the poem; yet, what happens is, and must be, shrouded in uncertainty.

"something I cannot name
something I cannot grasp"

The narrative of the poem turns in response to bearing witness, uniting the wounds with Julian's metaphor of one-ing.

4.2. One-Ing—A Mystical Dream Vision

Julian of Norwich develops her concept of one-ing with great complexity in *A Revelation of Love*. Her metaphor of one-ing, "alle is one love" (*A Revelation* 59.37), is a mystical union with the nuanced quality of the perichoretic distinction of the Trinity, as the following examples show:

"all the soules that shalle be saved in heven without ende be knit in this knot, and oned in this oning". (*A Revelation* 53:52)

"thus in Crist oure two kindes be oned". (*A Revelation* 57.16)

Following this sense of distinction within unity with God's love is the concept of Julian's sense of "sekirness" in God, of being held in a sense of security in God's love. Yet, this is a nuanced point: she underlines her belief that this security does not mean the prevention or avoidance of suffering. This is key to the way in which Julian's theology fits with the reality of trauma. So, of greatest significance to *Blue: a lament for the sea* is the following quotation from close to the end of *A Revelation*.

"If any such liver be in erth which is continually kepte fro falling, I know it not, for it was not shewde me. But this was shewde: that in falling and in rising we are ever preciously kepte in one love". (*A Revelation* 82.22–24)

Julian of Norwich states clearly that it was not shown to her that any lover of God on earth is kept from suffering or falling; but, it was shown to her that in all our falling and rising we are held preciously in "one love", God's love⁹. *Blue: a lament for the sea* embodies the theological paradox in the narrative. The poem brings the axial moment of trauma together with its equal and opposite, the depth dimension of divine love (Finley 2015): there is no refuge from suffering, but suffering has no refuge from love.

"The One unmade who makes
with a down-lying crying-out pain
keens, suffering has no refuge from Love. . ."

In the poem, words of divine love literally suffuse the seascape and landscape. Divine love comes to uphold all of material reality.

“Suffering has no refuge from Love. . .
 Her words magnify, bloom luminous through the cloud of blue before me. . .
 . . . Her words dilate through gorgeous swarms of trilling krill
 . . . Her words presence the whole blue
 Love seeing, touching, holding
 in a knowing
 a one-ing. . .”

The alterity of poetry invites the audience or readers to imagine differently. The poetry is not didactic; it is empathic. The reader and audience can choose to journey along with the narrator in discovery. The poem ends with an exhortation, following Julian, to think and act with our hearts, in contemplative action: what newness may we birth?

The hope is that the reader or audience may participate in a cognitive reframing that can help overcome the socially constructed silence and apathy of ecological grief.

5. Conclusions

A theopoetic making process with texts of the mystics such as with Julian of Norwich can configure new frameworks of meaning and, through the ambiguity of poetry, let the texts breathe and communicate further. The expressive richness of poetry as the most intense of literary forms can redress the imbalances in traditional scholarship towards the seemingly purely rational and logical (Bowen 2016).

In this case, the theopoetic process illuminates intersections with trauma-informed theology underpinned by critical rigour with the weight to hold traumatic suffering. A poetic holding of uncertainty allows for greater information to be gathered; it allows for greater possibilities to unfold. To Julian of Norwich, all material reality, even the homely and abject, is upheld in God’s one love. In the subtle quality of porous, undefended bearing witness to suffering without negating the moral order, the wound can undergo a transfiguring in a one-ing with God’s love.

Mapping Julian’s theology at the intersection with trauma theology with the ecological crisis can support engagement with these difficult and urgent issues. *Blue: a lament for the sea* enacts the intersections through poetry as we journey along with the narrator. The long poem holds the audience and readers as the narrator gives voice to eco-anxiety, guilt and grief. Through new language, we can participate in a cognitive reframing that may help overcome the socially constructed silence and apathy of ecological grief. The poem becomes visionary, a showing, to borrow Julian’s word. Being loving in action is needed in response to the climate emergency. The creative–critical method leads to a deepening of intersectional research insights that, through creative forms, naturally provides channels for public impact.

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Notes

- ¹ *Blue: a lament for the sea* by Liz MacWhirter will be published as a pamphlet by the poetry press, Stewed Rhubarb, in October 2025. www.stewedrhubarb.org.
- ² As much as it is generative to theology, the post-critical landscape can be challenging to some for its problematizing of religious orthodoxies, attracting criticism. See, Mills (2001).
- ³ Medieval literary scholar Elizabeth Robertson has published widely on the relationships between gender, vernacular theology and poetics. In her pivotal work on medieval medical views and female spirituality, Robertson shows that medieval theological commentaries were saturated in Aristotelean—not Platonic—thought, and that this belief in women’s earthbound souls conditioned representations of female spirituality and restricted a woman’s relationship to her own spirituality. Women were cast as incomplete and deficient in reason, physiologically wet and cold, and therefore in a constant state of desiring the completing and balancing effect of male heat in sexual union and the purgation of excess moisture. To the medieval mind, bodily fluids such as blood, tears and sperm were transmutable. Moreover, contemporary works focused on an association between Christ’s humanity and feminine flesh, in contrast to the association of divinity with masculinity and reason. Robertson argues that the impossibility for a woman to transcend her own femininity was thought to have constrained even her conceptualising of God. See, Robertson (1993).
- ⁴ The abjection of Julian’s body in her near-death illness was linked to her “hypostatic sense-experience of dying revelation” which generated “unfettered” theological creativity. See, Gillespie (2017, p. 129).
- ⁵ The paradoxical theme of Julian’s abject state as she generatively bore witness to Christ’s wounds is explored in my larger creative–critical doctoral project.
- ⁶ The idea of Christ’s wounds in heaven denoting suffering in empathy with all those still hurting in creation was suggested in conversation by Dr. Sli Thabede, whose work focuses on the epidemic of gender violence in South Africa.
- ⁷ Free verse is defined by the Poetry Foundation as nonmetrical, nonrhyming lines that closely follow the natural rhythms of speech.
- ⁸ The multi-media performance of *Blue: a lament for the sea* achieves a surreal quality through the poetic language and by a ‘live’ backdrop: an underwater maritime film by digital artist and theologian Jonathan Kearney.
- ⁹ I explore the subtlety of this holding as an ontological experience in my doctoral project.

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Article

Literature and Mysticism in the Wake of Silvano Panunzio: From *The Divine Comedy* to the European Literature of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract: This article introduces one of the forgotten figures of religious and literary studies: the Italian scholar, philosopher, metaphysician, poet and writer Silvano Panunzio (1918–2010). His contribution has so far been relegated to the margins of academic debate, and, currently, there are no academic studies on his work, in which mysticism plays a pivotal role. Panunzio believed that the transcendental and mystical dimension is fundamental for fully understanding the social, cultural, historical and political events of humanity. Another relevant aspect of his work is the importance he gave to literature and its relationship with mysticism, as in the case of Dante's *Divine Comedy* or other European and Eastern writers and poets, such as Goethe, Shakespeare, Ibn Arabi and Dostoevsky. Significantly, Panunzio saved from oblivion the work of a forgotten man of letters of the nineteenth century, Gabriele Rossetti (1783–1854), who proposed the first symbolic and esoteric interpretation of Dante's literary production and of European medieval love literature. Raising awareness of the intellectual amnesia around the figure of Silvano Panunzio may be a useful contribution to future research, both in the field of religious and literary studies.

Keywords: Silvano Panunzio; mysticism; comparative literature; Dante; European literature; Eastern tradition; medieval love literature; amnesia in the history of ideas; Gabriele Rossetti

1. Introduction

Michel de Certeau's *Mystic Fable* and other such works have introduced the idea of mysticism as a genre of literature. Bracketing out religious experiences, such scholarship focuses on the philological and logical elements of literary texts, as well as ideal and material contextual factors behind such texts. At the same time, religious studies tend to zoom in on the confessional elements of such works or their critical–historical context. Such approaches are very revealing, but they tend to leave a dilemma when it comes to influential intellectuals who insisted that mystical literature was more than either, being both transformative and transcendent. Such methodological innovations try to balance the competing reductions of literature to mystical traditions or of mystical experiences to a genre of literature and of both to socio–historical contexts. Could a more complex methodology be found that holds both literature and mysticism in tension? What would such a methodological approach mean when it comes to famous mystical texts, such as those by Dante? This paper explores these questions through the life and work of one such public European intellectual who brought this balanced sensibility between literary and mystical studies but whose contributions have been largely sidelined. This is a forgotten figure in the field of religious and literary studies, the Italian scholar, philosopher, poet and writer Silvano Panunzio (1918–2010). He was an intellectual and metaphysician who was also involved in the Italian political context of the 1970s, the so-called 'anni di piombo'

(the Years of Lead), during which Italy faced one of the darkest periods of its recent history because of both the far-left and far-right terrorist attacks that plagued the country.

Silvano Panunzio's family was associated with Fascism due to the friendship of his father, Sergio Panunzio, with Benito Mussolini, as well as the youth political militancy in the ranks of socialism, which they shared. The shadow of his father prevented Silvano from pursuing an academic career, as the academic milieu was hostile towards him for his family's political sympathies. Moreover, after the shocking event of the death of his beloved son Pietro, he decided not to fight and to defend himself against the obstructionism of university baronies (see La Fata 2021, p. 38). Thus, after spending twelve years as a Lecturer of the History of Political Doctrines and Philosophy of Law at La Sapienza University in Rome, he left his academic post and worked in various Italian high schools until 1975, the year in which he was appointed by the Prime Minister of Italy Aldo Moro¹ as Foreign Press Officer at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

In studying the figure of Silvano Panunzio, what is particularly interesting to point out is that an intellectual of his stature, who was also respected at the political level, spoke openly about the invisible world. He explained the sociological, cultural, historical and political reality through mysticism. He believed that the transcendental and mystical dimension is key to fully understanding the events of the history of mankind. Referencing the mystical dimension means dealing with the dimension of the invisible reality, and, in this respect, Panunzio stresses the centrality of literature to affirm, explore, record and pass on mystical truths and experiences. Thus, literature becomes a means of both transcendence and transformation. Moreover, in bringing together literature and mysticism, one of Panunzio's great merits was to rediscover and spread the forgotten work of Gabriele Rossetti—the nineteenth-century poet and scholar who produced the first systematic study on the esotericism of Dante and medieval love literature, and more generally on the relations between literature and esotericism.²

The work in which Panunzio studies the mystical dimension of Dante and his *Divine Comedy* is *Cielo e Terra. "Poesia, Simbolismo, Sapienza nel Poema Sacro"* (tr. *Heaven and Earth. "Poetry, Symbolism, Wisdom in the Sacred Poem"*). In this book, Panunzio broadens the exegetical perspective of Dante's work by linking it to European literature, as well as to Eastern mystical literature and tradition. Panunzio specifies that the truths concerning the spiritual world cannot be grasped and understood by "the unbelieving and undeserving materialists"³ (Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 106) but only by "those who have mystical experience"⁴ (ibid.). Silvano Panunzio was undoubtedly one of the most original and little-known intellectuals to openly speak of mysticism in terms of fact as the essence of the history of humanity; however, he was not only an intellectual whose contribution focused on mysticism: he himself had mystical experiences during his life. This aspect is particularly interesting because the study of the mystical dimension of literature and the history of ideas is written by someone who has a profound knowledge of the mystical reality—the "ineffable experience",⁵ as he called it in *Cielo e terra* (ibid., p. 103).

With regard to current research, the most comprehensive and detailed work on the figure of Silvano Panunzio is *Silvano Panunzio. Vita e pensiero* (tr. *Silvano Panunzio. Life and Thought*) by Aldo La Fata, who was his disciple. La Fata is, to my knowledge, the only scholar who has contributed to making Panunzio's work known to the scientific community and enabling Silvano Panunzio's major works to be published. He was also responsible for editing reprints of these works, in addition to directing and editing the collective work *Dalla Metafisica alla Metapolitica. Omaggio a Silvano Panunzio nel centenario della nascita* (tr. *From Metaphysics to Metapolitics. A Tribute to Silvano Panunzio on the Centenary of his Birth*).⁶ The figure and the work of Silvano Panunzio deserve in-depth research, which is still lacking and which would be useful both for literary criticism and religious studies. Literary studies would benefit from the fact that the literary text should be approached and analysed using criteria that are not philological but rather specifically related to the mystical symbolism, language and dimension. In terms of religious studies, the main benefit is the opportunity to explore a topic which is unexplored as regards scholarship and which

can focus both on the figure and the work of Panunzio. In particular, Panunzio attempted to blend together various religious traditions around singular mystical “experiences”, which makes his efforts all the more relevant today. Thus, this article is one of the first attempts and steps in acknowledging this case of intellectual amnesia in the history of ideas and opening up unexplored horizons of research, whose pivotal role is played by the pre-eminent importance of mysticism in our society.⁷

Rather than answering any specific question empirically, this article explores one work by Panunzio to understand what his method of holding literary and mystical aspects of texts together could look like. Given Panunzio’s own approach, it is important to connect his own life experiences to his outlook. The first part of this article introduces the figure and life of Silvano Panunzio, which is fundamental for understanding his mysticism and his work. The second section examines his contribution, in particular, to the different themes that feature in his work. Each *topos* can be studied separately and be the focus of a single piece of research. This explains the descriptive and introductory nature of this pioneering article on Silvano Panunzio, which can and should be followed up with further research on these multiple aspects.

2. Panunzio’s Life Explains His Work

Before analysing the book *Cielo e Terra*, devoted to the relations between literature and mysticism, it is worth introducing some aspects concerning Panunzio’s life and personality, which shed light on his work. Aldo La Fata perfectly sums up Panunzio’s approach to life as follows: “Despite the hard and painful blows received from life, he will always act as if nothing unpleasant has happened to him”⁸ (La Fata 2021, p. 38). One of the most painful events of his life was the death of his father, Sergio, in 1944, when Silvano was 26 years old. He had a nervous breakdown that caused him to lose his way, but it was his future wife, Matilde Vittoria Ricci, who saved him from this state of existential crisis. Thanks to Matilde, Panunzio regained his *joie de vivre* and a new spiritual strength. Another event that affected his life was the death of his third son, Pietro, who died at the tender age of two in his father’s arms due to a sudden illness. Little Pietro died on St. Peter and St. Paul’s Day, 29 June, and, from that day on, Silvano Panunzio would continually dream of his son who was to become a sort of ‘soul-guide’ for his father. It was Panunzio himself who confided to Aldo La Fata that he always did what little Pietro, after his death, asked his father to do, appearing to him in dreams (see *ibid.*, pp. 36–37). These dreams reveal an atmosphere of mysticism that pervaded the life and the personality of Silvano Panunzio, who, in fact, had a first mystical experience when he was seven years old. This event was an encounter with a supernatural reality at Mount Gargano, in the southern Italian region of Apulia, where the Shrine of St. Michael is located, which also explains Panunzio’s particular devotion to the Archangel Michael (see *ibid.*, p. 24).⁹

Silvano Panunzio believed he was a chosen one who had charismatically received from Heaven a spiritual mission to fulfil on Earth through his works. His aim was to counter the widespread materialism of contemporary society and promote a transcendental conception of existence. In particular, he intended to evangelise political and cultural circles (especially those of the more radical right), to fight the dominant progressive and Enlightenment culture of the modern era through the recovery of Christian faith and spirituality (in an initiatory perspective of the Christian religion) by assimilating the metaphysical doctrines of the East, in the wake of a fruitful dialogue between Christian, Islamic and Hindu traditions. This openness of Christianity towards Islam and Buddhism was an idea shared by Panunzio with a Pope whom he knew and met with personally, namely, Pope John XXIII (Angelo Roncalli). There was, in fact, an intense and fruitful dialogue between the two. “We Christians also have a duty to honour Moses, Buddha and Mohammed”¹⁰ (in *ibid.*, p. 122), these are the words of Angelo Roncalli spoken at a Eucharistic celebration in St. Mark’s Basilica in Venice, which Panunzio had attended and particularly appreciated because of the recognition by a Pope of the importance of the dialogue between Christianity and the Islamic and Hindu religions. Pope John XXIII was not the only Pontiff that Panunzio knew.

During his adolescence, he met Pope Pius XI at a meeting between the Pontiff and Silvano's father, Sergio Panunzio, concerning the construction of the Vatican railway station. On that occasion, Pius XI wanted to lay his hand on Silvano Panunzio, who, for the rest of his life, would remember that gesture, which he said unleashed a spiritual energy that mystically transmitted from the Pontiff's blessing hand to Panunzio's body and soul (see La Fata 2021, pp. 26–27). Moreover, Pius XII had a connection, albeit indirectly, with Silvano Panunzio. In fact, an undated letter (in the possession of Aldo La Fata) written by Francesco Carnelutti, a regular visitor to the Vatican rooms, to Panunzio reveals that "the Pontiff (Pius XII) follows with curiosity and interest the things you write"¹¹ (in *ibid.*, p. 121). The things he wrote about were strictly linked to mysticism.

3. Panunzio's Thought, Its Influences and the Concept of 'Hindu Catholicism'

In his works, Panunzio speaks openly of the visible and the invisible world, of the difference between Good and Evil, between life and the mystery of death; he deals with sensitive topics such as metempsychosis and the pre-existence of the soul (which he believes is eternal); he focuses on the mystery of God and exposes a mystical, prophetic, cosmological and metaphysical gnosis. Another important topic that profoundly interested Silvano Panunzio was Marian apparitions, especially those of Garabandal, La Salette, Lourdes and Fatima. Panunzio was particularly attached to the Virgin Mary of Fatima, who is an important figure in both the Christian and Islamic traditions, being Fâtima al-Zahrâ, daughter of the prophet Mohammed.¹²

Moreover, one of the most significant contributions of Silvano Panunzio is undoubtedly the theorisation of the concept of "Metapolitics", which is expounded in his book *Metapolitica. La Roma eterna e la nuova Gerusalemme* (tr. *Metapolitics. The Eternal Rome and the New Jerusalem*).¹³ The term 'metapolitics' was used for the first time in 1650 by the Cistercian monk Juan Caramuel Lobkowitz (1606–1682) in his work *Metapolitica hoc est Tractatus de Repubblica, Philosophice*, which introduced the notion of mystical *civitas* and which has a striking analogy with Panunzio's conception of metapolitics. In fact, Panunzio holds that metapolitics is metaphysics applied to political governance, a dialogue between contemplation and action, between Divine design and human commitment (of a social and political nature), and a prophetic wisdom closely linked to the ultimate destinies of humanity and the world. With regard to the destiny of mankind, Panunzio proposes a positive approach. In fact, though humanity is experiencing what is called the Kali Yuga in the Indian mystical tradition, namely, the age of darkness, he sees a rebirth in this epoch of sorrow and crisis. In fact, all the negative and dramatic events that characterise this age of darkness he considers as palingenetic transmutations. We could thus speak of the mystical prophetism of Silvano Panunzio, implying that future terrible events are interpreted in eschatological and redemptive terms: humanity has to suffer in order to be reborn, it has to die before rebirth since each rebirth takes place after death. "In such a perspective", as Aldo La Fata remarks, "distrust, renunciation, pessimism are banned"¹⁴ (*ibid.*, p. 148) since, based on Panunzio's thought and prophetism, the traumatic events and the social transformation processes of our era "must be understood and transcended in a vertical and ascending sense"¹⁵ (*ibid.*) as "the lowest point of fall is precisely where the ascent begins"¹⁶ (*ibid.*). Panunzio's pessimism about the historical situation of contemporary times was therefore always accompanied by a future of hope and trust, of complete reliance on God, which is why he used to repeat the maxim of St Ignatius of Loyola "pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you" (see *ibid.*).

The concept of Kali Yuga evoked in relation to modern times leads us to explore another fundamental topic cherished by Panunzio, namely, the thread linking Christianity to Hinduism. The title of a paragraph of Aldo La Fata's book *Silvano Panunzio. Vita e pensiero* clearly illustrates Panunzio's concept of the relationship between Christianity and Hinduism, "Induizzare il cristianesimo, cristianizzare l'induismo" ("Induising Christianity, Christianising Hinduism", *ibid.*, p. 137). This expression brilliantly sums up Panunzio's view of the dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism. In particular, among the most

important figures of this “‘Hinduised’ Christianity”¹⁷ (ibid., p. 139), the author of *Cielo e Terra* appreciates, studies and praises those of Bahavani Charan (1861–1907) and Keshab Chandra Sen (1848–1884). The latter had spoken of a theme dear to Panunzio, namely, a cosmic Christ that is hidden in the Vedas (see ibid.), while the former was a Bengali who converted to Christianity and firmly opposed theosophy, describing it as a plague that fascinates and confuses the spirituality of the masses. The danger of theosophist doctrines was highlighted both by Panunzio and René Guénon (specifically in his book of 1921, *Le théosophisme, histoire d’une pseudo-religion*), and other figures from the early twentieth century such as the literary critic (and expert on Dante) Giovanni Busnelli (1866–1944). Bhavani Charan publicly defied the theosophist Annie Besant, who never accepted the confrontation, but, beyond the former’s aversion to theosophy, what is important to emphasise is the interesting association between Christianity and Hinduism that he makes. In this regard, an extremely interesting document by Panunzio quotes a statement by Charan in which the expression “Hindu Catholic” is coined:

By birth we are Hindus and we will remain Hindus until death [...]. We are Hindus as far as our physical and mental constitution is concerned, but as far as our immortal soul is concerned we are Catholics. We are Hindu Catholics”.¹⁸
(Quoted in ibid., p. 138)

Thus, one of Panunzio’s great merits was to combine the Christian tradition with Eastern metaphysics. In this respect, a fundamental source of inspiration for him was René Guénon, whose ideas allowed him to bring Christianity closer to the philosophical and mystical speculations of the East and Asia. Panunzio was a follower of René Guénon’s traditionalism (despite criticising some of his ideas), but his singularity is the way he combines traditionalist thought with Catholicism.

Beyond René Guénon, other figures who had an important influence on Panunzio’s philosophy and played an intellectual and spiritual guiding role include Rabbi Eugenio Zolli (1881–1956), Monsignor Nicola Turchi (1882–1958), Agostino Zanon (1886–1967), Giuseppe Capograssi (1889–1956), Ubaldo Mondio (1904–1990) and Carmelo Ottaviani (1906–1980).¹⁹ In particular, the Benedictine monk and atomic scientist Agostino Zanon played a cardinal role in transmitting love for the Virgin Mary to Panunzio, whilst Giuseppe Capograssi imparted significant teachings to the author of *Cielo e Terra*, such as, for instance, the recommendation to never compromise with the forces of evil and to endure like a good Christian the martyrdom of those who, like Panunzio, opposed the forces of darkness and spread Christ’s teaching. In a letter quoted by Aldo La Fata in his book *Silvano Panunzio. Vita e pensiero*, Capograssi warns Panunzio that he must be prepared to endure ostracism in the future because of his work: “Dear Silvano, I remind you that the martyrial privilege of being in the evangelical Truth has as its fatal consequence theological hatred, meaning ‘satanic’, of all the self-excluded”²⁰ (in ibid., p. 83).

As for other influences, Eugenio Zolli introduced Panunzio to biblical exegesis, to the understanding of the *Zohar*, the most important book of the Kabbalistic tradition, to the discovery of the Christian Kabbalah of Pico della Mirandola, and to learning the basics of Hebrew and Semitic languages (see ibid., p. 87). Like Panunzio, Zolli also had mystical experiences, as he describes in his biography, where he reports a vision of Jesus Christ towards the end of 1917 (see Zolli 2004, p. 109; La Fata 2021, p. 88). However, the person who had the greatest influence on Silvano Panunzio was the Italian mystic and friar who received the stigmata, Padre Pio (1887–1968),²¹ defined by Umberto Marchesini as “the greatest saint of modern times”²² (in Allegri 2002, p. 3). Panunzio met Padre Pio twice in person, in 1966 and 1967, and was among those who supported the friar’s beatification. He described Padre Pio as an *alter Christus*, a ‘divine personality’ entirely imbued with the *imitatio Christi*, namely, a mystic and charismatic who deserved to be amongst the highest ranks of Christian saints, on par with St. Francis due to his great spirituality that enabled him to act in the community, helping so many suffering people through his powerful and radiating spiritual projections (see La Fata 2021, pp. 101–2). Panunzio focuses in particular on mysticism and the figure of Padre Pio in his work *Terra e Cielo: dal nostro Mondo ai*

Piani Superiori (tr. *Earth and Heaven: from our World to the Higher Planes*, Panunzio 2002), which has aptly been defined by Aldo La Fata as the “Christian ‘book of the dead’”²³ (La Fata 2021, p. 163), since it treats the theme of the death and the afterlife paths of the soul. This book is composed of two chapters, one devoted to Saint Camillus de Lellis (patron saint of the sick, nurses and hospitals), whilst the other is the report of a paper given by Panunzio at the study conference “L’ultimo problema della vita: la morte” (tr. “The Ultimate Problem of Life: Death”), which took place between 9 and 12 September 1993 in San Giovanni Rotondo (Padre Pio’s home from 1916 until the year of his death in 1968). The title of Panunzio’s paper was “Le frontiere dell’Al di là nel poema di Dante e negli aneliti di Padre Pio” (tr. “The Frontiers of the Hereafter in Dante’s poem and in Padre Pio’s Longings”), and what is extremely interesting and significant is the association with Dante and Padre Pio, linked by the theme of death and suffering.

4. *Cielo e Terra*: The Forgotten Work by Silvano Panunzio

Cielo e Terra by Silvano Panunzio is a forgotten work of literary criticism which has been completely marginalised in the academic debate.²⁴ Though this book has not received the attention it deserves, some authoritative scholars have recognised and praised its intellectual value. For instance, Raimon Panikkar was one of the first intellectuals to make Panunzio’s book known on an international scale.²⁵ In fact, when he held the Chair of Comparative Philosophy of Religions and History of Religions at the University of California, Panikkar introduced the texts of *Cielo e Terra* in his lectures, and the students were fascinated by the contents. It was Raimon Panikkar himself who informed Panunzio of the interest aroused by the book, as evidenced by an autograph note kept by Aldo La Fata (see *ibid.*, p. 166).

In *Cielo e Terra*, Silvano Panunzio shows that *The Divine Comedy* is a mystical work, describing a pilgrimage that symbolises the ascent of the soul and the ever-increasing conquest of the angelic states (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, pp. 119–23). Dante is defined as “the choral Catholic Initiate and the solitary Initiate of the New Dimension of the Spirit”²⁶ (*ibid.* p. 22). He is considered a “mystical Poet”²⁷ (*ibid.*, p. 27), and *The Divine Comedy* is a “journey into the invisible”²⁸ (*ibid.*, p. 50) which narrates “known and unknown, historical and occult events, all of world and even cosmic importance”²⁹ (*ibid.*, pp. 125–26). The mystical reading of Dante’s work, and, more generally, of literature, is not the only focus of Panunzio’s contribution as another of his merits was to rediscover the forgotten work of Gabriele Rossetti, opening up unexplored horizons of research. In fact, the esoteric interpretation of medieval love literature proposed by Rossetti also broadened its scope by embracing European and Eastern literature and mystical traditions.³⁰

According to Gabriele Rossetti, Dante and the Italian medieval love poets belonged to an esoteric Order of an initiatory nature: the Order of the *Fedeli d’Amore* (The Faithful of Love). The love poets of this initiatory group used a secret and coded language in their literary production in which the theme of love, the image of the girl or the symbol of the rose, concealed an esoteric knowledge of a mystical and initiatory nature, as well as political and religious ideas. Thus, the obscurity of medieval love literature also provided a way to avoid political and religious persecution using the literary device of love. Rossetti highlights that the initiatory doctrine of love was transmitted from the East to the West and then spread to Spain and France before reaching Italy. A major role in this regard was played by the French Troubadours and Trouvères poets, but, beyond French and Italian love poets of the Middle Ages, “we find”, as Rossetti writes, “[...] Minne-Sänger (namely Singers of love) in Germany, and Love-singers [...] in England; and right across Europe” (Rossetti [1840] 2013, p. 162).³¹

Rossetti’s ideas and theories gave rise to the so-called “heterodox” school of Dantean studies, which was composed of nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectuals and scholars, such as Giovanni Pascoli, Luigi Valli, Alfonso Ricolfi, Eugène Aroux and René Guénon, who sought to demonstrate the esoteric nature of Dante’s work and of medieval love literature. In particular, in the twentieth century, Denis de Rougemont wrote a book,

Love in the Western World, in which he proposed an esoteric interpretation of medieval love literature that confirms various ideas and themes developed by Gabriele Rossetti. The following passage of De Rougemont's book is significant in this respect:

There occurred during the twelfth century in Languedoc and in the Limousin one of the most extraordinary spiritual confluences of history. On the one hand, a strong Manichean religious current, which had originated in Persia, flowed through Asia Minor and the Balkans as far as Italy and France, bearing the esoteric doctrines of Maria Sophia and of love for the Form of Light. On the other hand, a highly refined rhetoric, with its set forms, themes, and characters, its ambiguities invariably recurring in the same places, and indeed its symbolism, pushes out from Iraq and the Sufi, who were inclined alike to Platonism and Manichaeism, and reaches Arabic Spain, then, leaping over the Pyrenees, it comes to the south of France upon a society that seems to have but awaited its arrival in order to *state* what it had not dared and had not been able to avow either in the clerical tongue or in the common vernacular. Courtly lyrical poetry was the offspring of that encounter. (De Rougemont [1940] 1983, p. 107)

De Rougemont draws on Eugène Aroux and Luigi Valli, but he does not mention Gabriele Rossetti, who was the source of both Aroux and Valli.³² Rossetti was the pioneer of this forgotten and neglected aspect of the history of ideas, which was marginalised in the academic debate, whilst the two most important works in which he set out his theories are *Il Mistero dell'Amor Platonico del Medio Evo* (tr. *The Mystery of Platonic Love of the Middle Ages*, 1840) and *La Beatrice di Dante* (tr. *The Beatrice of Dante*, 1842).³³ Silvano Panunzio found the latter particularly interesting, as he makes clear in *Cielo e Terra*: "*La Beatrice di Dante* by Gabriele Rossetti is a classic work of Italian thought and literature and is, jointly, a European masterpiece"³⁴ (Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 42). He edited the 1982 edition of the book (published by the Atanòr Publishing House), writing an introduction to it which praises the figure and contribution of Gabriele Rossetti.³⁵ Panunzio acknowledges the connection between Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore* as well as with the Templars, but he goes far beyond the common esoteric interpretation that sees the author of *The Divine Comedy* as merely belonging to the initiatory Order of the Faithful of Love. Dante appears to have metaphysically transcended the *Fedeli d'Amore*, even surpassing them, thereby diminishing the importance of and influence on Dante's work of this initiatory brotherhood composed of Italian love poets.

While Dante is considered a "mystical poet", Gabriele Rossetti is defined by Silvano Panunzio as the "mystical interpreter"³⁶ (ibid.) of *The Divine Comedy*, the "mediator of the textual Knowledge of the word of Pythagoras, Plato and Dante"³⁷ (ibid., p. 83). In *Cielo e Terra*, he not only evidences the mystical dimension of Dante's work (and Rossetti's symbolic interpretation) but also links it to the mysticism found in European literature and in the Hindu and Arabic traditions (in particular, Persian poetry).³⁸ One of the most important connections suggested by Panunzio is between Dante and Goethe. In this regard, he coined the expression "comparative symmetries"³⁹ (ibid., p. 22), indicating the analogies between Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Goethe's *Faust*, between the Dantean Beatrice and the Goethean Marguerite, who both represent "the Eternal Woman, *Evau*, combined with the *Jod* in the Divine Name and Tetragrammaton (IHVH)"⁴⁰ (ibid., p. 32). Dante's Beatrice corresponds to the "Eternal Feminine of Goethe's *Faust*"⁴¹ (ibid.) symbolised by Marguerite. Beatrice "is the Saint Gnosis"⁴² (ibid.), who leads towards divine wisdom. In *The Divine Comedy*, as Panunzio points out, there are four saintly women: Maria, Beatrice, Lucia and Matelda. The latter symbolises the second birth, or rebirth of the soul, through the detachment from all that is earthly. Lucia and Beatrice represent what Panunzio calls the third Birth, linked, respectively, to Light (Lucia) and Truth (Beatrice). Finally, Maria is the eternal birth, as theorised by Eckhart (see ibid.). Thus, Panunzio considers the image of the woman in Dante, as well as in other authors, such as Goethe, to be initiatory in nature, where the quest of the woman is the spiritual path towards a mystical fusion with God.

The parallel between Dante and Goethe is undoubtedly one of Panunzio's major insights in the wake of a mystical reading of literature. These two writers and poets are linked in *Cielo e Terra* to an esoteric tradition embracing figures from different epochs, such as Plato [defined by Panunzio as "the universal Initiator"⁴³ (ibid., p. 25)], Shakespeare [("the prophet of the Occult in the secret Northern Islands"⁴⁴ (ibid.))], Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Pascal, Cervantes, Manzoni, Beethoven, Wagner, Dostoevsky and Vladimir Sergeevič Solov'ëv (see ibid.). In particular, the connection between Dostoevsky, Solov'ëv and Dante is another of Panunzio's interesting insights, linking the Russian with the medieval Italian literary doctrine of love. Dostoevsky is defined as "the evangelical prophet, in the mystical Russia"⁴⁵ (ibid.), whilst Solov'ëv is described as "the formulator of that 'sophianic' doctrine that brings together the Hellenic Venus, the Egyptian Isis and the Christian Mary in the superior, Platonic and Dantean synthesis of a perfect Faithful of Love"⁴⁶ (ibid.). Both Dostoevsky and Solov'ëv are linked by Panunzio to Dante and, more specifically, to the complex history of the esotericism of medieval Italian love poetry of the *Fedeli d'Amore*. Thus, the symbolic and heterodox interpretation of medieval love literature established by Gabriele Rossetti is developed by Panunzio in a new and original manner, opening up unexpected and unexplored exegetical perspectives that no representative amongst Rossetti's followers had identified, for example, the links between Dante, Goethe, Dostoevsky and Solov'ëv.

Thanks to Panunzio, Gabriele Rossetti's theories embrace European literature as well as the Eastern mystical tradition. In fact, in *Cielo e Terra*, he draws a parallel between Dante and the Arab poet and mystic Ibn Arabi (see ibid., pp. 45–80) and between medieval Italian love poetry and Sufism. In fact, according to Panunzio, the mystical doctrine of the Italian *Fedeli d'Amore* derived from the mysticism of Persian Sufism,⁴⁷ which originated in the Indian Vedanta mystical tradition. On the latter, Panunzio suggests an interesting relationship between the Eastern conception of Tantric Yoga and the biblical-troubadour mystique (see ibid., p. 64). Moreover, he highlights that the period when Dante wrote his work featured at least seven spiritual currents, which had a direct or indirect influence on his literary production: Joachimism, the Franciscanism of St. Bonaventure, Templarism [defined by Panunzio as the "chivalrous mission of the occult France"⁴⁸ (ibid., p. 56)], alchemical hermeticism (which spread from Egypt to Morocco and Spain), Persian Sufism,⁴⁹ the prophetic Kabbalism of Abulafia and, finally, Vedantism (see ibid., pp. 55–56).

In *Cielo e Terra*, Panunzio addresses and develops many significant topics concerning the esotericism attributed to Dante and the medieval love poets, clarifying some obscure points of this complex phenomenon in the history of ideas. Compared to the previous esoteric interpretation of Dante's work and medieval love literature, Panunzio's contribution differs in that it rehabilitates the role of Catholicism. Unlike Rossetti or Valli, in *Cielo e Terra*, there is no opposition between the Catholic Institution and an alleged heretical love doctrine, and it is necessary that the Church monitors the heretical associations. According to Panunzio, the religious authority's vigilance is legitimate because "the first and most repeated error of the 'heretics' lies in wanting to perform in the public domain (with words, gestures, writings, even with omissions)"⁵⁰ (ibid., p. 107), whilst "the inner fire that feeds the secret life ('the heart') of a Mystic or an initiate can in no way, with undue ardour, alter the face of a ruling Religion"⁵¹ (ibid.). In this respect, Panunzio takes the Sufi poet Al-Hallâj (858–922) as a role model. In fact, he mentions that Al-Hallâj was executed by the Islamic religious authority for having publicly pronounced the maxim "Aná Al Haqq" ("Ego sum Veritas"), "I am the Truth", namely, God (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 108). However, Panunzio affirms, "a truly 'pneumatic' Being does not seek to obtain the favourable judgement of men" but "he accomplishes everything while awaiting the ineffable and most severe judgment of the Angels"⁵² (ibid., p. 107). Here, the author of *Cielo e Terra* overtly speaks of the Angels and states the following:

there are not only "the Angels of persons", there exist also—see the Old Testament and the Apocalypse—"the Angels of the nations" and "Angels of the churches";

finally, there are the supreme Angels who scrutinise us and mark us on the forehead as in the progressive ascent of the Dantean journey.⁵³ (ibid.)

In this passage of *Cielo e Terra*, Silvano Panunzio clearly refers to the mystical and invisible reality in which angels are not abstract ideas but spiritual beings that really exist.

Interestingly, these references to angels and the invisible world are mentioned by an intellectual like Silvano Panunzio, who was not simply an expert on the occult but a respected figure at the political level under the Italian Government of Prime Minister Aldo Moro, as we have seen at the beginning of this article. Panunzio specifies that the subject of his writing cannot be scientifically proven and, therefore, referencing the question of the *Fedeli d'Amore*, he affirms that “we are in a transcendental realm where human documents do not exist”⁵⁴ (ibid., p. 75). In particular, he links Dante and the *Fedeli d'Amore* to invisible entities: “there are words escaped here and there from the author’s [Dante’s] pen which, read subtly, confirm that he has had an encounter at the highest level with the residues not of the abused *Fedeli d'Amore*, but rather with the invisible masters of them”⁵⁵ (ibid.). In another passage relating to Dante, he writes about the mystical and invisible reality, stating the following:

There exists an invisible prophetic community, *kadmic*, that is to say “original”, which goes back to the beginnings of pre-adamic humanity: it silently emits its rays on the Church, on the religious Orders, on the chivalric Orders. The Pontiff Clemente Romano, in one of his epistles, says that it is “older than the sun and the moon”. This explains why Father Dante, disappointed and inconsolable, entrusted him at the end of his life with the *supra-sense* of his creations for 500 years. And this explains the revelation that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not in the decadent and already equivocal Knights Templar and their so-called heirs, but in the Johannine Order and in the orthodox and older Order of Malta. This explains how Dante entrusted his ideal testament *with hope* to the “Spirits of the Prophets” (Ap 22:6) who are also the Guardian Angels of the true Poets exposed to martyrdom. (Incidentally, the much-repeated *Fedeli d'Amore* today is a pale parody of the above-mentioned Community of Light, which is in no way transcendent. They contain the most mature Poet [Dante] who, not by chance, placed them in Hell)! In reality, there was no personal “discovery by Rossetti” on the island,⁵⁶ but an *ingenious reconstruction* of the authentic data that were mysteriously offered to him by the Sacred Singer himself.⁵⁷ (Ibid., pp. 76–77)

This passage from *Cielo e Terra* shows the complexity of the literary theme of love in the Middle Ages, as interpreted by the so-called “heterodox” school of Dantean studies inaugurated by Gabriele Rossetti. Compared to other esoteric and symbolic interpretations of medieval love literature, Panunzio’s is one of the most original and little-known, being completely forgotten and marginalised in the academic debate. The originality lies in the fact that it offers a new exegetical perspective in which the main parameter of interpretation is mysticism. Love literature is conveyed by Panunzio through the lens of mysticism. Thus, for example, the theme of “secrecy” and cryptic language of the *Fedeli d'Amore* is not explained by Panunzio in political and sectarian terms or in a coded jargon used by the medieval love poets, which was used to avoid political and religious persecution, as one can read in *Cielo e Terra*:

The allegorist school’s version of the arcane motifs observed by Dante and his friends is not the authentic one. That Luigi Valli and other scholars argue this rule is to be attributed to “sectarian” secrecy and the need for defence against the inquisitorial gaze of the Church and Power in general, is acceptable, as these are scholars who have considered all this from the outside. But it cannot fail to amaze that a spiritual man of Gabriele Rossetti’s calibre, deeply immersed in the inexpressible mysteries,⁵⁸ inviolable in themselves, of the Initiatory Way and the Mystical Way, would, without delving deeper, have considered the same thing. To interpret the “secrecy” of the *Fedeli d'Amore* as concealment by sectarians and heretics is to confuse superficial elements of friction with inner experiences

that are intangible. The Initiate is not heterodox in doctrine, nor rebellious in his behaviour. If by a sudden “fall” he became such, it would mean that his initiation was very imperfect. And it is no coincidence that such drifts happen to “neophytes” or those who are walking at lower levels. In the Initiate from above (that has nothing at all to do with the exhibitionist degrees bestowed by horizontal associations, none excepted) there can be neither substantial nor formal opposition to publicly constituted religious institutions. He knows better than anyone else, and at least to the same extent as the members of the Priesthood in office, that such entities are of unimpeachable divine origin. Nor is their decadence sufficient reason to move on to revolt and contestation of a, precisely, heretical nature. This unduly mixes empirical facts and individual cases with transcendent principles and perennial entities: in a word, the subjective with the objective, the particular with the universal. It will not go without saying here that *airèmoni*—whence “heresy” and “heretic”—literally means in Greek “I choose a side” [...].⁵⁹ (Ibid., pp. 102–3)

In this passage, the explanation of the secret and cryptic language of love poetry differs from all previous interpretations proposed by the so-called “heterodox” school of Dantean studies and finds its *raison d’être* in mysticism. So, Panunzio argues that “the ‘jargon’ [...] is used both to train and refine spiritual intelligence—which would be contaminated by ordinary language, weakened by the necessary tension—and to protect the essential sanctity of the Mystery from the profanes”⁶⁰ (ibid., p. 106). Moreover, he adds an aspect that neither Rossetti nor Valli had mentioned, namely, the meaning of the word “jargon”, which should not be considered in sectarian terms but in esoteric ones. Panunzio confirms Rossetti’s theory of Italian and European medieval love poets, which are, in reality, an initiatory group. He calls them “an initiatory Christian community whose members communicated with each other with poems expressed in jargon”⁶¹ (ibid., p. 89), and remarks that the word “jargon” derives from the medieval French word “jergon” that derives, in turn, from the word “argot”, which is not the Parisian dialect of the suburbs, but originates from the sacred language of the Argonauts, as revealed by the mysterious twentieth-century alchemist Fulcanelli in his book *Le Mystère des Cathédrales* (tr. *The Mystery of the Cathedrals*, Fulcanelli [1926] 1971).⁶² Panunzio refers to Fulcanelli in order to explain the esoteric meaning of the words “jargon” and “argot”. In fact, argot means “gothic language”, or magic language, since gothic means magic (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, pp. 89–90). In this respect, Fulcanelli writes that “gothic art (*art gothique*) is simply a corruption of the word *argothique* (cant), which sounds exactly the same” and that “this is in conformity with the *phonetic law*, which governs the traditional cabala in every language and does not pay attention to spelling” (Fulcanelli [1926] 1971, p. 42). The esoteric meaning of the word “gothic” is also closely linked with medieval gothic cathedrals because “the cathedral is a work of *art goth* (gothic art) or of *argot*, i.e., cant or slang” and, as Fulcanelli affirms, slang is a “*spoken cabala*”: “all the Initiates expressed themselves in cant; the vagrants of the *Court of Miracles*—headed by the poet Villon—as well as the Freemasons of the Middle Ages, ‘members of the lodge of God’, who built the *argothique* masterpieces, which we still admire today” (ibid.). In this passage, Fulcanelli points out that “slang” (thus also “jargon” and “argot”) is the language of the initiates and refers to the Freemasons of the Middle Ages, as well as to two French men of letters: the medieval poet François Villon and the Renaissance writer François Rabelais.⁶³ Therefore, “*The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais is an esoteric work, a novel in cant”, and “the good curé of Meudon reveals himself in it a great initiate, as well as first-class cabalist” (ibid., p. 44). Thus, the esotericism of Dante and medieval love literature propounded by Rossetti, and, subsequently, by Panunzio, is now associated with the esotericism of French writers and poets, such as Villon and Rabelais, embracing European literature. This openness towards European literature, as well as Eastern literature and mystical tradition, is one of Silvano Panunzio’s main themes and merits, as I have already pointed out.

Panunzio held that the mystical symbolism and doctrine are not only present in Dante but also in other authors and intellectuals in the history of ideas, such as Apuleius, Shakespeare (for example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Bacon (in his book *De sapientia veterum*) or Ibn Arabi: all of them speak of a “virtù magica”, a “magical virtue”, namely, “a mental-spiritual force capable of operating the internal transformation of the states of Being”⁶⁴ (Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 80). Other significant literary works that the author of *Cielo e Terra* mentions are *The Romance of the Rose* by Jean de Meung and Guillaume de Lorris, *Séraphita* by Balzac, the literary compositions of Guido Cavalcanti, Petrarch, Tasso, Giacomo Leopardi, Gabriele D’Annunzio, and the initiatory novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton *Zanoni* (1842), in which, as Panunzio stresses, the Ancient Mysteries of Egyptian Tradition are connected with the Christian Mystery (see *ibid.*, p. 119). However, the difference between these literary works and *The Divine Comedy*, in Panunzio’s view, is that Dante’s masterpiece is not only a literary work but a sacred text. In fact, Dante, Homer and Virgil would have been “poet-priests, mystagogues and hierophants of the Divine Mysteries”⁶⁵ (*ibid.*, p. 46) of the invisible divine realities. The knowledge contained in *The Divine Comedy* is mystical gnosis which, Panunzio believes, is shared with other religious and literary figures and traditions throughout the centuries, such as Moses and the Sacred Science of the Egyptians, John the Baptist and the Essenes, Al-Ghazali and the Islamic Batiniyya school or Goethe and the Illuminati of his time (see *ibid.*, pp. 58–60).⁶⁶ Panunzio specifies that Dante’s sapiential doctrine requires knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, Metaphysics or Gnosis, finding its synthesis in Platonism, the speculative and mystical Theology of the Christian tradition, of the Cosmological Sciences, such as Arithmology, Astrology and Hermetic Symbolology, and, finally, of the mythological, poetic and literary tradition of the classical world. He considered Gabriele Rossetti to be an interpreter who excelled in these five orders of knowledge (see *ibid.*, p. 47). Like the Prophets, Dante would have been endowed with the supernatural powers and knowledge transposed in his literary masterpiece, whose real nature is sacred essence, a journey into the realm of the invisible (see *ibid.*, pp. 48, 52–53), whilst the highest order of the mysteries contained in Dante’s *Comedy* is the “initiatory-mystical course”⁶⁷ (*ibid.*, p. 66), which corresponds to “the reunion of the Cross and the Rose”⁶⁸ (*ibid.*, p. 67). More precisely, as we read in *Cielo e Terra*, “the Cross is the active and penetrating Force of the avataric Sacrifice, it is the male moulding Divinity; the Rose is the Wisdom of Love, cosmic Beauty, universal plasticity, or the female receptive Divinity”⁶⁹ (*ibid.*). In particular, the mystery of the “initiatory-mystical course” is closely linked to the white rose, connected, in turn, with the occult reality of the invisible:

This Rose is “candid”: and to understand its whiteness, one must have understood the mysteries of the prophet Hosea (the first to speak of it biblically), of the very ancient and “heavenly” Iran, and of the Origins of the “White Spirit”. This, in a word, is tantamount to crossing the boundary, hence infinite, between the “faithful of love” (*fedele d’amore*) written in lower case, in inverted commas, and the capitalised Faithful of Love (*Fedele d’Amore*) of the ultra-maximum Love that *moves the Sun*—the Eternal Christ—and the *other Stars*—the angelic or divine Beings.⁷⁰ (*Ibid.*, p. 128)

In this passage, we find the concept of Eternal Christ, which is a pivotal theme in Panunzio’s beliefs. He used to call himself a “lover of Jesus”, a “lover of Christ”, as Aldo La Fata remarks (see La Fata 2021, p. 80).⁷¹ The figure and the message of Jesus are of cardinal importance in Panunzio’s work and thought, and, for Rossetti too, the figure of Jesus Christ is of primary importance, as we can see, for example, in *La Beatrice di Dante*: “I venerate the religion of Jesus Christ; and everything that may be contrary to it [. . .], I reject it with all the strength of my mind and heart”⁷² (Rossetti [1842] 2019, p. 537). Silvano Panunzio explains that Gabriele Rossetti’s anti-papal and anti-ecclesiastical animosity is rooted in the corruption of the men who represented the institution of the Church and is in no way opposed to Christianity. Thus, one cannot consider Rossetti as a heterodox opponent of the Catholic Church. On the contrary, as the author of *Cielo e Terra* points out, Rossetti continually proclaims he is a Christian, a Catholic, and considers the Gospel as

the text in which the truths of the true religion are contained (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, pp. 73–74). William Michael Rossetti, Gabriele's son, confirms this particular aspect of his father's thought and ideas: "it should be understood that, though a fervent and outspoken anti-papalist, he [Gabriele Rossetti] never expressly renounced the Roman Catholic faith" (in Rossetti 1901, p. 71).

In addition to the importance given to the Catholic creed and the figure of Jesus Christ in the history of humanity, another figure that represents a pivotal focus both for Rossetti and Panunzio is Beatrice. In his mystical interpretation of literature, mainly in Dante's literary production, Panunzio devotes particular attention to the figure of Beatrice, who was the main focus of his exegetical contribution. Following Rossetti's interpretation in his work *La Beatrice di Dante*, Panunzio states that the mystery of Beatrice is purely of a metaphysical nature (as in the *Song of Songs*), "namely of the *unio* and *fusio mystica* of the human Soul with the Divine Intellect, of the personal Spirit with the Universal Spirit"⁷³ (Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 85). Beatrice is the mysterious Woman of Boethius, who is, at the same time, the Platonic Philosophy and the human Wise Faculty: the former instructs from the outside and the latter dwells in the soul of man. She allows the ascent into Heaven, which is not a vague expression but a mystical concept, namely, the passage from active to contemplative life. In this respect, Panunzio writes that "the Soul devoted to 'Contemplation' is symbolically transformed into Woman, precisely because she is more receptive and more quiescent to the Supreme Divine Omnipotence. [...] It will precede the other part remaining on Earth to fight, that is, Man with his duties of 'Action'"⁷⁴ (ibid., p. 88). The seraphic fusion between the Intellect of Love (Dante) and his Soul (Beatrice) is celebrated in the Eighth heaven⁷⁵ (the heaven of the Cherubs), perfected in the Ninth (the one of the Seraphs) and glorified in the Tenth heaven (see ibid.).⁷⁶ It is, therefore, an inner faculty dormant in the human being that must be (re)conquered to achieve perfection, the spiritual regime of new life, through a passage of death and rebirth (see ibid., p. 87).

Thus, in *Cielo e Terra*, Dante's work is studied from the perspective of the mystical-initiatory component in the wake of Rossetti's contribution. One of the great merits of the latter is, in Panunzio's view, to have demonstrated the dissemination of the occult Wisdom in literature (as well as in Greek and Latin classical texts), especially the fact that this esoteric knowledge occurs through Myth, which "is not the spontaneous, fantastic, popular creation, but the wise, 'sacerdotal' creation of hierophants, of initiated Poets, or Prophets"⁷⁷ (ibid., p. 77). Myth is strictly linked to mysticism, as Panunzio points out, affirming that "'Myth' derives from the identical root of 'Mystique' and 'Mystery'" and "the very origin of the word indicates a clear and unequivocal hieratic provenance"⁷⁸ (ibid.). The Myth is also present in the common language, which was not invented by the people but by the Sacred Grammarians (see ibid., p. 78). So, if we include the proverbs, for example, we need to bear in mind that they are not the product of popular expression but, as Panunzio writes, "they are an elemental adaptation of the Sentences of the Sages and the veritable religious and heroic Myths"⁷⁹ (ibid.). More precisely, *Cielo e Terra* contains an interesting passage in this regard:

People do not invent anything at all, least of all language in its complex physical-metaphysical structure, which is the work of the sacred Grammarians, from the first human being to speak, Adam, to the first man to write, Enoch: and from the descendants of every place and nation. This is the doctrine that Dante makes his own and through which he teaches us. But the moderns, in their insipid arrogance, consider as "outdated" a divine Alighieri instructed by the "Spirits of the Prophets"! (*Apocalypse* XXII-6).⁸⁰ (Ibid.)

This passage from *Cielo e Terra* signals that Dante's work is not simply literature but pure prophetic and mystical knowledge transposed in the form of literary composition. Literature is, thus, a means of preserving and transmitting this sacred knowledge, as Gabriele Rossetti demonstrated by studying Dante and European medieval love literature. Panunzio praises this great merit of Rossetti and emphasises the fact that he was marginalised in European academic debate due to his interpretation of literature in a symbolic and esoteric

key. In the “Introduction” of the 1982 edition of *La Beatrice di Dante*, Panunzio defined Rossetti as an intellectual “very little known and too much forgotten”⁸¹ (in Rossetti [1842] 1982, p. VII), while, in *Cielo e Terra*, he remarks that Rossetti was convinced that in the future his ideas would be taken up and endorsed by scholars more capable of demonstrating their veracity (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 79). Silvano Panunzio was undoubtedly one of the few scholars who fought to recognise the merits of Rossetti’s contribution, saving the author of *La Beatrice di Dante* from oblivion.

5. Conclusions

The figure and the work of Silvano Panunzio represent a vast and hitherto unexplored horizon of research, a field in which new and unexpected discoveries are waiting to be made and which are relevant to both religious and literary studies. Aldo La Fata rightly defines Panunzio as an “extraordinary but neglected Christian thinker and philosopher”⁸² (La Fata 2018, p. 5) who sought to prove the existence of a gnosis and of a Christian esotericism linked specifically to the Islamic and Hindu mystical traditions. Mysticism is at the heart of his contribution and of his interpretation of literature in authors such as Dante, Ibn Arabi, Pascal, Cervantes, Manzoni, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoevsky and Solov’ev.

Panunzio’s treatment of religious traditions other than Christianity may, of course, be subjected to critiques of selective syncretism or even appropriation. Such critiques would be helpful in situating him in his times of growing Italian interest in the “East”. Still, Panunzio’s main concern remains in mystical experience as a human quality that can transform readers, not specifically in interreligious commonalities or differences.

As we have seen, in explaining the true meaning of the term ‘jargon’, referred to the *Fedeli d’Amore*, Panunzio emphasises the importance of language, whose cryptic and hermetic nature is necessary to refine spiritual intelligence and protect its sanctity from the profane. This explains that “the evangelical ‘do not give holy things to dogs’, namely strangers, and ‘do not throw pearls to swine’, meaning the unbelieving and undeserving materialists”⁸³ (Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 106). As Silvano Panunzio writes, “the most dangerous profane and profaner is oneself. Those who have mystical experience know and understand this very well”⁸⁴ (ibid.). This sentence is highly significant since the author shows he is aware of a dimension from which ordinary people are excluded, namely, the mystical reality of the invisible world.

In a letter of 24 June 1974, Silvano Panunzio wrote the following:

When we have parents, we sometimes quarrel and bicker with them; but when our mother and father pass away, we realise with sorrow what we have lost. We Catholics have lost the Father (the Sun of pure Knowledge); now the Mother (the Church, the Moon, the Symbol) is paralysed in a cot. A miracle can always happen and the paralytic can walk again. But, even immobile in bed, she is still the Mother. Better alive than being euthanised. And the spiritual energies of twentieth-century Traditionalism—the ungrateful children—instead of helping her from within, set about judging her and making her—poor old woman—inept and stammering. To love the Church is to love Jesus; and to love Jesus is to love and serve God”.⁸⁵ (In La Fata 2021, p. 133)

By using the metaphor of the loss of parents, Silvano Panunzio paints a picture of modern society, deprived of faith, imbued with materialism and forgetful of the existence of spiritual reality. Through his work, Panunzio sought to express the basic need for spirituality and religion “in a world confused and dark and disturbed by portents of fear” (Eliot 2001, p. 432), as Eliot wrote in his poetical composition *Choruses from “The Rock”*. In this world, characterised by the decadence of the spirit, Panunzio attempted to show that humanity needs transcendence, that the human heart needs a metaphysical dimension, without which individuals become cold, mechanical, unfeeling and apathetic, and, here again, a passage from Eliot brilliantly sums up the desolation of modern society:

Forgetful, you neglect your shrines and churches;

The men you are in these times deride
 What has been done of good, you find explanations
 To satisfy the rational and enlightened mind.
 Second, you neglect and belittle the desert.
 The desert is not remote in southern tropics,
 The desert is not only around the corner,
 The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you,
 The desert is in the heart of your brother. (Ibid., p. 400)

Healing the wounds of humanity through the act of spreading metaphysical knowledge was one of Silvano Panunzio's greatest merits, though his efforts are still partly neglected, given that his contribution has been relegated to the fringes of academic debate. Not only was his work imbued with mysticism but his personality as well, which deserves particular attention as Panunzio represents a forgotten figure who had mystical experiences and whose teachings could be useful to point a suffering humanity towards the path of spiritual elevation. As Aldo La Fata comments, "in everything he [Panunzio] wrote, did or said, he always saw the sign of a destiny, the imprint of a higher will"⁸⁶ (La Fata 2021, p. 7). Panunzio was convinced that he had a prophetic mission to fulfil during his lifetime—a task set for him by divine Providence in which he firmly believed (see *ibid.*, p. 8). He was also convinced that nothing happens by chance, and in this respect, he recalls, in *Cielo e Terra*, a curious event related to his links with Gabriele Rossetti. Panunzio writes that he first heard Gabriele Rossetti's name when he was about ten years old and attended secondary school in Rome. It was a classmate of his who told him about the author of *La Beatrice di Dante* as he was a native of Vasto, Rossetti's hometown, and boasted of being a descendant of his. The mother of this schoolmate also often spoke to a very young Silvano Panunzio about Gabriele Rossetti (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, pp. 39–40). "It was thus", Panunzio writes in *Cielo e Terra*, "that from early adolescence these unusual names and themes were impressed on my ear and heart", and "I would never have imagined that one day I would have the privilege of contributing to the reprinting of Gabriele Rossetti's greatest work"⁸⁷ (*ibid.*, p. 40). Significantly, Panunzio continues by affirming that "there are, in the course of each existence, mysterious and invisible threads that, interwoven, unravel and unwind even over the longest periods"⁸⁸ (*ibid.*). Following this statement, a mystical and higher dimension would thus intervene in the events of our life, and what we call coincidences would be nothing more than these mysterious and invisible threads evoked by Silvano Panunzio that would shape the course of each human existence. *Cielo e Terra* teaches the reader that the invisible and eternal world of Heaven exists and is directly linked with the transitory reality of the Earth.

In response to the question motivating this article, Panunzio also demonstrates how a literary train, such as from Dante to Rossetti and beyond, can be considered to be more than either literature or religion. Rather, he shows how to analyse such texts as both and more, as sources of transformation that have, in fact, led to a transmission of mystical knowledge and esoteric learning in Europe.

Silvano Panunzio shows that literature is a path which leads to the awareness that mysticism is the unknown essence of human life, enabling us to perceive the invisible threads that weave the story of our own destiny, directly or indirectly linked with other destinies, both in this worldly life and in the world that we cannot see, as in the case of a father who leaves this world and from the Hereafter continues to be the angel who lovingly guides his son on earth, from Heaven to Earth: *Cielo e Terra*.

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Notes

- 1 In 1978 Aldo Moro was brutally killed by the Red Brigades, an Italian far-left terrorist organisation.
- 2 On the esotericism of Dante and of medieval love literature (see Rossetti [1840] 2013, [1842] 1982; Valli [1929] 2013; Ricolfi [1933] 2013; De Rougemont [1940] 1983; *L'idea deforme. Interpretazioni esoteriche di Dante* 1989; Salzani 2014). On Dante scholarship (see *In Pursuit of Perfection: Courtly Love in Medieval Literature* 1975; Singleton [1954] 2019; Barolini 1984; Harrison 1988; Kirkpatrick [1987] 2004).
- 3 “Materialisti increduli e immeritevoli”. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.
- 4 “Chi ha esperienza mistica”.
- 5 “Esperienza ineffabile”.
- 6 There is only one other collective research work on Panunzio, published in 1998 and edited by Rodolfo Gordini and Sergio Sotgiu: *Testimone dell’Assoluto. “L’itinerario umano e intellettuale di Silvano Panunzio”* (tr. *Witness of the Absolute. “The Human and Intellectual Itinerary of Silvano Panunzio”*). See also Giardini (2019). The most important works by Silvano Panunzio include: Panunzio (2014, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2022).
- 7 Concerning recent scholarship on mysticism, see *The Presence of Light. Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, edited by Kapstein (2004); McGinn (1991, 1994); Sells (2004).
- 8 “Nonostante i colpi duri e dolorosi ricevuti dalla vita, egli si comporterà sempre come se non gli fosse accaduto alcunché di spiacevole”.
- 9 Silvano Panunzio founded in 1959 a religious Order inspired by the Archangel Michael, the ATMA (Alleanza Tradizionale Michele Arcangelo, tr. Traditional Alliance Michael Archangel), whose aim was to oppose the materialism of modern society in favour of a transcendent and spiritual conception of life (see La Fata 2021, pp. 59–63).
- 10 “Noi cristiani abbiamo il dovere di onorare anche Mosé, Buddha e Maometto”.
- 11 “Il Pontefice (Pio XII) segue con curiosità e interesse le cose che scrivi”.
- 12 Panunzio dedicated a study to the figure of Fatima, published in the journal *Metapolitica* in 1978 and entitled “Il simbolismo di Fatima” (tr. “The Symbolism of Fatima”). See Panunzio (2019b, pp. 897–904).
- 13 In the work *Metapolitica. La Roma Eterna e la Nuova Gerusalemme*, Panunzio shows that the history of humanity is characterised by an occult war between two opposing forces, the principle of evil and the principle of good, the left hand and the right hand of God, and this contraposition of the invisible realm influences the historical, political and social reality of humanity. It is therefore a transcendental conception of politics.
- 14 “In questa prospettiva la sfiducia, la rinuncia, il pessimismo sono banditi”.
- 15 “[Questi processi] vanno compresi e trascesi in senso verticale e ascendente”.
- 16 “Il punto più basso di caduta è proprio quello in cui comincia la risalita”.
- 17 “Cristianesimo ‘induizzato’”.
- 18 “Per nascita siamo indù e resteremo indù fino alla morte [. . .]. Siamo indù per quanto riguarda la nostra costituzione fisica e mentale, ma riguardo alla nostra anima immortale siamo cattolici. Siamo cattolici hindù”.
- 19 Notable books in Panunzio’s library include those by Mircea Eliade, Julius Evola, Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burckhardt, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Martin Lings, Marco Passil, Michel Vâlsan, Leo Schaya, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Henry Corbin. As Aldo La Fata points out, the works most appreciated by Panunzio were those by Schuon, Burckhardt, Coomaraswamy and Corbin (see La Fata 2021, p. 105).
- 20 “Caro Silvano, ti rammento che il privilegio martirizzante di essere nella Verità evangelica ha come conseguenza fatale l’odio teologico, alias ‘satanico’, di tutti gli auto-esclusi”.
- 21 To Padre Pio, Silvano Panunzio (1992) dedicated the book *Solo nel mistero di Dio: sinossi ascetico-mistica da tutti gli scritti di Padre Pio da Pietralcina*. On Padre Pio, see Preziuso (1990); Allegri (2002).
- 22 “[I] più grande santo dell’epoca moderna”. Padre Pio was canonised on 16 June 2002, during the pontificate of John Paul II, who knew Padre Pio personally. To Karol Wojtyła, before he became Pope, Padre Pio had said at a meeting between them: “You will be a Pope, but there will be blood and violence” (“Tu sarai Papa, ma vi sarà sangue e violenza”, in Succi [2007] 2013, p. 383).
- 23 “‘Libro dei morti’ cristiano”.
- 24 The texts composing *Cielo e Terra* were written in the 1980s but with a limited print run of only a few copies, then it was published in 2009 by Metapolitica editions and finally the first real and complete edition of the book *Cielo e Terra* was published in 2019 by Simmetria editions.
- 25 Beyond Panikkar, other intellectuals contributed to making Silvano Panunzio’s ideas known beyond Italy, such as the Polish political scientist Jacek Bartyzel, the Spanish philosopher Gustavo Bueno Martínez, the Argentine philosopher Alberto Buela and the Portuguese scholar João Dagoberto Forte Bigotte Chorão.
- 26 “Il corale Iniziato cattolico e il solitario Iniziato della Nuova dimensione dello Spirito”.

- 27 “Poeta mistico”.
- 28 “Viaggio nell’invisibile”.
- 29 “Eventi noti ed ignoti, storici e occulti, tutti d’importanza mondiale e addirittura cosmica”.
- 30 Another forgotten figure of the European 19th century literary field praised by Silvano Panunzio is the French poet and writer Fabre d’Olivet (1767–1825) who, as one can read in *Cielo e Terra*, showed (like Rossetti) the presence of the Sacred Science in literature (especially medieval literature), creating a bridge between the Western mystical tradition and the Eastern one (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 83). Rossetti is defined by Panunzio “the Italian Fabre d’Olivet” (“il Fabre d’Olivet italiano”, *ibid.*, p. 41).
- 31 “Troviamo [del pari Cantori d’amore in Italia], Minne-Sänger (cioè Cantori d’amore) in Germania, e Love-singers (cioè Cantori d’amore) in Inghilterra; e così in tutt’i paesi d’Europa”.
- 32 It is worth pointing out that Eugène Aroux plagiarized Rossetti’s work. On this, see Giannantonio (1983, pp. 356–96); Fabrizio-Costa (2010, pp. 89–108).
- 33 La *Beatrice di Dante* by Gabriele Rossetti was published, in an incomplete version, in 1842 and later in 1935, before the 1982 edition edited by Panunzio.
- 34 “La Beatrice di Dante di Gabriele Rossetti è un’opera classica del pensiero e della letteratura dell’Italia ed è, congiuntamente, un capolavoro europeo”.
- 35 It is worth pointing out that Panunzio criticises and correct some errors of Rossetti’s interpretation. For instance, one of the criticisms Panunzio made of Rossetti is that he did not take into account Dante’s spiritual development that led him to distance himself from the *Fedeli d’Amore*, and thus not share their ideals and knowledge in mystical and initiatory matters. In *Cielo e Terra*, we read that Dante experienced a strong spiritual crisis, especially in the last seven years of his life, and it was this change in his spiritual and existential regime that distanced him from the uncritical radicalism of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, who without him, effectively became a sect (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 138).
- 36 “Mistico interprete”.
- 37 “Mediatore della Conosceza testuale del verbo di Pitagora, di Platone e di Dante”.
- 38 On the relations between Dante’s work and the Islamic mystical tradition, see Palacios ([1919] 2020); Campanini (2019); Celli (2013); *Dante and Islam*, edited by Ziolkowski (2015).
- 39 “Simmetrie comparative”.
- 40 “La Donna Eterna, *Evau*, unita allo *Jod* nel Nome Divino e Tetragramma (IHVH)”.
- 41 “L’Eterno Femile del *Faust* di Goethe”.
- 42 “Beatrice [. . .] è la Santa Gnosi in sé: come pure è la Comunità spirituale e la Scuola iniziatica che vi conducono”.
- 43 “L’Iniziatore universale”.
- 44 “Il vate dell’Occulto nelle segrete Isole Settentrionali”.
- 45 “Il vate evangelico, nella Russia mistica”.
- 46 “Il formulatore di quella dottrina ‘sofianica’ che riunisce la Venere ellenica, l’Iside egizia e la Maria cristiana nella sintesi superiore, platonica e dantesca di un perfetto Fedele d’Amore”.
- 47 Panunzio highlights that the expression “Fedeli d’Amore” (Faithful of Love) is of Sufic derivation (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 110).
- 48 “Missione cavalleresca della Francia occulta”.
- 49 It was Luigi Valli in particular who focused on the relations between Sufism and the mystical tradition of the *Fedeli d’Amore*.
- 50 “Il primo è più ripetuto errore degli ‘eretici’ sta nel volersi esibire sulla pubblica piazza (con le parole, con i gesti, con gli scritti, persino con le omissioni)”. Aldo La Fata points out that even the esotericism to which Panunzio refers is grounded on religious authority because, when approaching such a sensitive subject as esotericism, “it is necessary to anchor oneself in the solid ground of traditional Religion, to avoid both the abstractions of a vague spiritualism and the dangers of stumbling into lower order psychisms” (“è necessario ancorarsi al terreno solido della Religione tradizionale, per evitare sia le astrattezze di un vago spiritualismo che i pericoli di inciampare in psichismi di ordine inferiore”, La Fata 2021, p. 134). In particular, the esotericism to which Panunzio refers is not the “institutional or formal esotericism such as the Masonic one”, but the “real traditional esotericism such as is found, for example, in the ‘Greek mysteries’, in Tibetan Buddhism and in Arabic Sufism” (“esoterismo istituzionale o formale come quello massonico”; “vero esoterismo tradizionale quale si trova, ad esempio, nei ‘misteri greci’, nel buddhismo tibetano e nel sufismo islamico”, *ibid.*, p. 133).
- 51 “Il fuoco interno che alimenta la vita segreta (‘il cuore’) di un Mistico o di un iniziato non può in alcun modo, con indebite vampate, alterare il volto di una Religione regnante”.
- 52 “Un Essere veramente ‘pneumatico’ non cerca di procurarsi il giudizio favorevole degli uomini [. . .]. Egli invece compie ogni cosa attendendo l’ineffabile e severissimo giudizio degli Angeli”.
- 53 “Non ci sono solo ‘gli Angeli delle persone’, esistono anche—vedi l’Antico Testamento e l’Apocalisse—‘gli Angeli delle nazioni’ e ‘gli Angeli delle chiese’: infine gli Angeli supremi che ci scrutano e ci segnano in fronte come nell’ascesa progressiva del viaggio dantesco”.

- 54 “Siamo in un campo trascendente in cui i documenti umani non esistono”.
- 55 “Vi sono parole sfuggite qua e là dalla penna dell’Autore le quali, lette in modo sottile, confermano che egli ebbe un incontro ai più alti livelli con i residui non già degli abusati Fedeli d’Amore, semmai con i maestri invisibili dei medesimi”.
- 56 Rossetti was exiled, first in Malta and then in the UK.
- 57 “Esiste una invisibile Comunità Profetica, *cadmica*, ossia ‘originaria’ che risale ai primordi umani pre-adamitici: la quale, in silenzio, emana i suoi raggi sulla Chiesa, sugli Ordini Religiosi, sugli Ordini Cavallereschi. Il Pontefice Clemente Romano, in una sua Epistola, la dice ‘più antica del Sole e della Luna’. Ciò spiega come mai il Padre Dante, deluso e sconsolato, abbia alla fine della vita affidato a questa, per 500 anni, il *soprasenso* delle sue creazioni. E spiega la rivelazione avvenuta nel Sette-Ottocento non presso i decaduti, già equivoci Templari e loro pretesi eredi, bensì nell’ortodosso e più antico Ordine Giovannita e di Malta. Spiega come Dante abbia affidato *con speranza* il suo testamento ideale agli ‘Spiriti dei Profeti’ (Ap 22, 6) che sono anche gli Angeli Custodi dei Poeti veri esposti al martirio. (Tra l’altro, i tanto ripetuti, oggi, ‘Fedeli d’Amore’, sono una pallida parodia della indicata *Comunità della Luce*, affatto trascendente. Essi contengono il più maturo Poeta che, non a caso, li ha collocati all’Inferno!)”. All’atto pratico, non ci fu nell’Isola una personale ‘scoperta di Rossetti’, ma una sua *ricostruzione geniale* sui dati autentici offertigli, misteriosamente, dallo stesso Cantore sacro”.
- 58 With regard to the sources on which Gabriele Rossetti would have drawn, Panunzio points out that they were “ancient and authoritative sources, yet living ones of a higher level” (“fonti antiche e autorevoli, e pur tuttavia viventi di superiore livello”, Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 163). The mathematician, philosopher and esotericist Arturo Reghini (*alias* Pietro Negri) also confirms that “Rossetti, first systematic discoverer of the sectarian jargon of the *Fedeli d’Amore*, was led to his interpretation by knowledge of ancient secret traditions” (“Rossetti, primo sistematico scopritore del gergo settario dei Fedeli d’Amore, fu condotto alla sua interpretazione dalla conoscenza di antiche tradizioni segrete”, Negri [1971] 2006, p. 99).
- 59 “La versione della scuola allegorista sui motivi della disciplina arcani, osservata da Dante e dai suoi amici, non è quella autentica. Che Luigi Valli ed altri letterati sostengano come tale regola sia da imputare al segreto ‘settario’ e alla necessità di difesa dagli sguardi inquisitoriali della Chiesa e del potere in genere, può anche passare, in quanto si tratta di studiosi i quali hanno opinato tutto ciò dall’esterno. Ma non può non meravigliare che un Uomo spirituale della tempra di Gabriele Rossetti, profondamente addentro ai misteri inesprimibili, inviolabili in sé, della Via iniziatica e della Via mistica, abbia, senza approfondire, ritenuto la stessa cosa. Interpretare la ‘segretezza’ dei Fedeli d’Amore, come il nascondimento dei settari e degli eretici, significa confondere i piani superficiali di attrito con le esperienze interiori che sono intangibili. L’Iniziato non è eterodosso quanto alla dottrina, né ribelle per il suo comportamento. Se per un’improvvisa ‘caduta’ divenisse tale, ciò vuol dire che la sua Iniziazione era molto imperfetta. E non è un caso che tali slittamenti capitino ai ‘neofiti’ o agli incamminati su balze inferiori. Nell’Iniziato dall’alto (cosa che non ha niente a che fare con i gradi esibizionistici elargiti da associazioni orizzontali, nessuna esclusa) non ci può essere opposizione né sostanziale né formale alle Istituzioni religiose pubblicamente costituite. Egli sa benissimo, meglio di ogni altro, e almeno nella stessa misura dei membri del Sacerdozio in carica, che tali entità sono di ineccepibile origine divina. Né la decadenza delle medesime è ragione sufficiente per passare alla rivolta e alla contestazione di tipo, appunto, ereticale. Questa mescola indebitamente fatti empirici e casi individuali con principi trascendenti e organismi perenni: in una parola, il soggettivo con l’oggettivo, il particolare con l’universale. Non sarà qui inutile ricordare che *airèmoni*—dove ‘eresia’ ed ‘eretico’—significa letteralmente in greco ‘scelgo una parte’”.
- 60 “Il ‘gergo’ [...] viene adoperato sia per allenare e affinare l’intelligenza spirituale—che dal linguaggio ordinario verrebbe contaminata, affievolita dalla tensione necessaria—sia per proteggere dai profani la sacralità essenziale del Mistero”.
- 61 “Una Comunità cristiana iniziatica i cui membri comunicavano tra loro con poesie espresse in gergo”.
- 62 Panunzio states that the alchemist Fulcanelli is one of the rare representatives in the twentieth century of the mystical and hermetic tradition (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 118).
- 63 On the esoteric dimension of Rabelais’ work, see Claude-Sosthène Grasset d’Orcet, Joséphin Péladan, *Le double langage de Rabelais*, Paris, Éditions Edite-ODS, 2015. According to Panunzio, among the other writers evoked by Fulcanelli, particular attention should be paid to Cyrano de Bergerac (1619–1655) who wrote *Voyage dans L’autre Monde. Les États et empires de la Lune. Les États et empires du soleil*, which is an alchemical text containing knowledge of the astrological Tradition of the Invisible Worlds, and the same knowledge is also found in Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533), in the *Orlando innamorato* (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 167).
- 64 “Virtù magica”; “una forza mentale-spirituale capace di operare la trasformazione interna degli stati dell’Essere”.
- 65 “Poeti-sacerdoti, mistagoghi e ierofanti dei Divini Misteri”.
- 66 Panunzio draws an interesting parallel between Dante and Saint Benedict, between the *Rule* and *The Divine Comedy*. In fact, the *Rule* by Saint Benedict states that spiritual pilgrimage leads to the Way of the Desert, which is not the ascetic acceptance of solitude but, on the contrary, is the fight against the Adversary: the Devil. The Desert is the battle between the human being and the demons, against the diabolic adversary which destroys the life of individuals causing pain and suffering. This is the same principle that we find in Dante’s descent into Hell (see Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 60).
- 67 “‘Corso iniziatico-mistico’”.
- 68 “La riunione della Croce e della Rosa”.
- 69 “La Croce è la Forza attiva e penetrante del Sacrificio avatarico, è la Divinità plasmatrice maschile; la Rosa è la Sapienza d’Amore, la Bellezza cosmica, la plasticità universale, o la Divinità ricettiva femminile”.

- 70 “Questa Rosa è ‘candida’: e per intendere tale suo candore bisogna aver inteso i misteri del profeta Osea (il primo a biblicamente
parlarne), dell’Iràn antichissimo e ‘paradisiaco’, e delle Origini dello ‘Spirito Bianco’. Il che, in una parola, equivale al passaggio
al limite, dunque infinito, tra il minuscolo ‘fedele d’amore’ tra virgolette e il Fedele tutto maiuscolo dell’Amore ultramaiuscolo
che *move il Sole*—il Cristo Eterno—e *l’altre Stelle*—gli Esseri angelici o divinizzati”.
- 71 On the importance given by Panunzio to the figure of Jesus Christ, see Maddalena 2018, pp. 108–15.
- 72 “Io venero la religion di Gesù Cristo; e tutto quello che può risultare ad essa contrario [...], io lo rigetto con tutta la forza della
mia mente e del mio cuore”.
- 73 “[I]l mistero di Beatrice [...] ossia dell’*unio* e *fusio mystica* dell’Anima umana con l’Intelletto Divino, dello Spirito personale con la
Spirito Universale”.
- 74 “L’Anima dedita alla ‘Contemplazione’ è simbolicamente trasformata in Donna, appunto perché più ricettiva e più quiescente
alla Suprema Onnipotenza Divina. [...] Essa precederà l’altra parte rimasta in Terra a combattere, ossia l’Uomo con i suoi doveri
di ‘Azione’”.
- 75 The first seven Heavens are the inferior ones, as Panunzio remarks, and we should remember that the Heavens represent “the
hierarchy of the Sciences of the Spirit” (“la gerarchia delle Scienze dello Spirito”, Panunzio [2009] 2019, p. 120). Heavens are the
various grades of the ascent of the Soul, which lead to the angelical states (see *ibid.*, pp. 120–22).
- 76 It is worth recalling the importance of numerical symbolism in *The Divine Comedy*, especially numbers nine and ten.
- 77 “Il Mito non è creazione spontanea, fantastica, popolare, ma creazione sapiente, ‘sacerdotale’ di ierofanti, di Poeti iniziati, o di
Profeti”.
- 78 “‘Mito’ deriva dall’identica radice di ‘Mistica’ e di ‘Mistero’: e l’origine stessa del vocabolo indica una chiara e inequivocabile
provenienza ieratica”.
- 79 “Sono un adattamento elementare delle Sentenze dei Saggi e dei Miti religiosi ed eroici veri e propri”.
- 80 “Il popolo non inventa proprio nulla, meno che mai la lingua nella sua complessa struttura fisico-metafisica che è opera dei
Grammatici sacri, dal primo uomo parlante, Adamo, al primo uomo scrivente, Enoch: e dai discendenti d’ogni luogo e nazione.
È la dottrina che Dante fa propria e con cui ci ammaestra. Ma i moderni, nella loro boria insipiente, considerano ‘superato’ un
divino Alighieri istruito dagli ‘Spiriti dei Profeti!’ (*Ap.* XXII-6)”.
- 81 “Molto poco conosciuto e troppo dimenticato”.
- 82 “Straordinario ma trascurato pensatore e filosofo cristiano”.
- 83 “L’evangelico ‘non dare le cose sante ai cani’ ossia agli estranei, e ‘non gettare le perle ai porci’, cioè ai materialisti increduli e
immeritevoli”.
- 84 “Il più pericoloso profano e profanatore è rappresentato da se stessi. Chi ha esperienza mistica lo sa e lo capisce benissimo”.
- 85 “Quando si hanno i genitori, a volte si polemizza e si bisticcia con loro; ma quando il padre e la madre vengono meno ci si accorge
con dolore di quello che si è perduto. Noi cattolici abbiamo perduto il Padre (il Sole della Conoscenza pura); ora la Madre (la
Chiesa, La Luna, il Simbolo) è paralizzata in un lettuccio. Può sempre avvenire un miracolo e la paralitica può rialzarsi. Ma,
anche immobile nel letto è sempre la Madre. Meglio viva che praticarle l’eutanasia. E le energie spirituali del Tradizionalismo del
‘900—i figli ingrati—invece di aiutarla dall’interno, si sono messi a giudicarla e a renderla—povera vecchia—inetta e balbettante.
Amare la Chiesa è amare Gesù; e amare Gesù è amare e servire Dio.”
- 86 “In tutto ciò che ha scritto, fatto o detto, egli ha sempre visto il segno di un destino, la traccia di una volontà superiore”.
- 87 “Fu così che fin dalla prima adolescenza mi vennero inoculati, nell’orecchio e nel cuore, questi nomi e questi temi insoliti”; “non
avrei mai immaginato di avere un giorno il privilegio di contribuire alla ristampa dell’opera principale di Gabriele Rossetti”.
- 88 “Vi sono nel corso di ciascuna esistenza, dei fili misteriosi e invisibili che, intrecciati, si sciolgono e si distendono anche alle più
lunghe scadenze”.

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Article

A Gladdening Vision of a Dancing Christ: Findings of a Ritual Ethnography of Intercultural Icons

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Abstract: The cultural renaissance in 20th-century India has fostered an aesthetic integration of contemplative mysticism with popular religious practices, influencing various artistic and theological movements. This paper examines Christian artist Joy Elamkunnappuzha's use of Indian classical and mythical elements in his religious artworks, particularly in two North Indian churches. These intercultural icons, which incorporate symbols from Hindu traditions like mandalas and mudras, have been central to the worship practices of local Catholic communities for over three decades. Through ritual ethnography, the study reveals how these visual representations mediate ritual affectivity and communal imagination, impacting identity formation and spiritual engagement in a multi-religious context. Respondents—including worshippers, ministers, and religious students—attest to the transformative impact of these images, as they negotiate between Christian metaphors and Hindu aesthetic traditions. The research is grounded in practical theology, liturgical theology, and ritual studies, contributing to the works of Indian Christian cultural activists like Jyoti Sahi. By exploring the creative dynamics of visual approach, visual appeal, and visual affinity within worship spaces, the study elucidates the complex processes of meaning making through symbolic mediation in interreligious environments.

Keywords: intercultural icons; interreligious mysticism; liturgy; Indian Christian aesthetics; ritual ethnography; practical theology; symbolic mediation

1. Introduction

Indian religious experiences, deeply rooted in spiritual and mystical traditions and manifested in popular piety, have long employed visual mediators to convey profound metaphysical concepts such as yoga, mandala, and mudras (Conger 1953). These concepts, often depicted in religious art, emphasize the coherence of all things and the pursuit of transcendental vision (Chakravarthi 2000). The cultural renaissance in 20th-century India has fostered a greater appreciation of classical Indian abstractions across the multi-religious spectrum. The use of hybrid visual representations in worship demonstrates how mystical ideals are transformed into tangible, lived experiences for the faithful. The Christian assimilation of Indian concept visualization is an interesting case of intercultural iconography and its practice.

In the context of increasing interreligious and intercultural dialogue, the case of Joy Elamkunnappuzha's artworks in several Christian churches located in North India demonstrates how culturally rooted symbols transcend religious aesthetics to foster faith experiences in cultural idioms. These artworks, deeply rooted in Indian classical and metaphysical traditions, and bearing traces of Hindu and Buddhist mystical symbols, present a unique intersection of Christian liturgy and Indian aesthetics, thus representing the complex process of inculturation in religious spaces. They also embody interreligious symbolism, translating into popular piety and ritual affectivity.

Through an inductive approach to intercultural ritual affectivity, this study explores how intercultural visual representations function as part of rituals, helping to mediate spiritual experiences and shape communal identity in worshipping communities. By looking at how these symbols are used in Christian worship, the study aims to understand

how art serves as a tool for spiritual (mystical) expression and influences the building of communal identity in a diverse and multi-religious context. It builds on the foundational work of Indian scholars and artists such as Sebastian Elavathingal, Michael Amaladoss, and Jyoti Sahi, who have explored the intersection of Christian theology, art, and cultural inculturation in the Indian theological circle. Elavathingal's insights into Christian art as a method of mission and cultural engagement (Elavathingal 1990), along with Amaladoss' call for deeper integration of Indian religious aesthetics, provide a theoretical backdrop for examining how interreligious artistic expressions shape worship (Amaladoss 2006). Jyoti Sahi's integration of Hindu elements into Christian iconography further underscores the dynamics of combining Indian and Christian conceptual frameworks in representations and worship (Sahi 1986).

2. Studying Icons Within Worship

In multi-religious and multi-meaning contexts, the influence of local and contextual symbolic elements in the creation and use of artistic representations in Christian worship open, among many other considerations, a variety of discussions related to liturgy, identity, inculturation, and communication of faith. The artistic and cultural adaptations of Christian missionary engagements in South Asian contexts, referred to as "inculturation", have attracted immense academic interest for their appeal in anthropological and theological discussions. While cultural anthropologists, Church historians, and pastoral theologians are motivated to discuss the types and styles of inculturational artworks and their religious and social implications, ritual studies experts are keen, additionally, on the creative, celebratory, communicative, and connective dimensions of the artworks in the context of worship (Grimes 2013; Geldhof 2020).

2.1. *Mysticism Visualized*

The study of intercultural icons in Christian worship offers a compelling case for exploring mysticism, particularly because these visual representations, as contextual embodiments of Christian content, generate complex debates surrounding syncretism, cultural appropriation, and theological boundaries. Viewed within the liturgical and ritual contexts, these images bear significant theological and spiritual weight, challenging traditional distinctions between Christian and non-Christian traditions. This study approaches the issue inductively through ethnographic methods, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis to explore how these icons mediate ritual affectivity and shape the lived religious experiences of worshippers.

I argue that the intercultural icons serve as a case of mysticism in action for two primary reasons: First, the motivations behind the creation of these worship spaces are rooted in the Indian cultural renaissance, which has often been framed as a rehabilitation of Hindu mystical traditions. Concepts such as mandala, darshan, and yoga, which have deep roots in Brahmanic mystical practices, have been widely integrated into popular religious and cultural contexts (Coomaraswamy 1927). These icons, by drawing on such mystical elements, represent a form of visual theology that bridges Christian content with Indian mystical frameworks.

Second, the ritual affectivity observed in the worship experience of the participants indicates that these visual elements facilitate an aesthetic and spiritual synthesis. This synthesis mirrors the transformative experiences commonly associated with mysticism (Elavathingal 2013), as evidenced by the participants' testimonies. Many worshippers have reported that their interaction with the icons led to deeper spiritual realizations, suggesting that these artworks not only enhance the liturgical experience but also guide the faithful toward a form of mystical transformation. This connection between visual representation and mystical experience will be further clarified through the survey findings in the second part of the study.

2.2. Empirical Access to Embodied Mysticism

The visual representations of theology in color and shape that are employed in worship as symbols of intertwining motifs function in at least three empirically accessible ways. Firstly, they present themselves as a locus of theological meanings of related practices. Secondly, the appeal of visual representations of faith in terms of their aesthetic quality as constitutive and mediative of the ritual is an integral part of the phenomenology of the religious experience they evoke. Thirdly, the fact that they embody the way ritual actualizes spirituality renders the icons, like any other forms of art, the sacramental manifestation of the Christian experience. In this paper, I explore the avenue of ritual phenomenology with the case study of Joy Elamkunnappuzha and his artistic installations at two sample churches in North India by investigating how these visual representations function as ritual elements that mediate spiritual experiences and shape communal identity within the worshipping community.

3. Methodology

I took an ethnographic and empirical approach to the study of lived worship elements to investigate how intercultural icons function in Christian worship settings and influence the worshipper's affectivity and transcendental experience. The study examined the artworks in their full ritual context, considering their interaction with cultural, theological, and communal factors. The analysis is based on live observation, participation, and interviews conducted within the churches located at Samanvaya Theological College in Bastar, Chhattisgarh, and Darsana Philosophy Institute in Wardha, Maharashtra, India.

This study adopted a two-phase empirical design, drawing on Ronald L. Grimes' concepts of ritual field and ritual criticism (Grimes 2013). Grimes describes the methodological terms—"ritual field" and "ritual criticism"—as explorations and analyses of rituals within their cultural and social contexts. The term ritual field refers to the holistic environment or space in which rituals occur, encompassing the social, cultural, historical, and physical elements that shape and influence a ritual. Grimes uses this concept to illustrate that rituals do not exist in isolation; they are embedded within broader networks of relationships, meanings, and influences. Ritual criticism refers to a method of evaluating and interpreting rituals. Grimes advocates for a critical, reflective approach to studying rituals, going beyond mere description to engage in a deeper analysis of how and why rituals work, what they communicate, and the implications they carry. These concepts and their methodological indications are adapted in this study as "icon field" and "icon criticism". I approach the intercultural icons as ritual elements and broaden the analysis to encompass their aesthetic significance. This methodological framework guides the analysis of how intercultural artworks function within Christian worship spaces. For the interpretative analysis in this paper, I will specifically focus on the icon of Epiphany Christ (Figure 1), following a general overview of the key ritual elements. This will allow for a deeper exploration of how this particular artwork functions within the ritual context, serving as a focal point for intercultural symbolism and spiritual engagement within the worshipping community.

3.1. Icon Field

The icon field phase focused on observing the artworks in their natural environments, documenting their conception and presentation in relation to the ritual and cultural contexts. The researcher conducted a two-week immersion at each church, engaging in participant observation during religious services to record how the worshippers interacted with the icons. Audio-visual recordings and textual notes were made, capturing the physical spaces, practices, and the role of the artwork in the worship experience. Selective participation in services allowed for the objective gathering of data, focusing on the ways the faithful interact with and respond to the icons.

As a result of this phase, a visual album of three films was produced to describe the phenomenon. The videos can be accessed at:

Film S1: "Inculturational Art Study Trailer", 2 min

https://youtu.be/0_jZk8s1hv8 (uploaded on 4 October 2022)

Film S2: "Darsana mandir: Gladdening Sacred Vision", 38 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeUeIhUacYY> (uploaded on 24 June 2023)

Film S3: "Samanvaya Devgudi: Sacred Dwelling of Harmony", 12 min

<https://youtu.be/UDAXl2xMYZU> (uploaded on 8 June 2024)



Figure 1. Elamkunnapuzha, Joy. Epiphany, 1988, Plaster, Darsana Institute of Philosophy, Wardha, India.

3.2. Icon Criticism

In the second phase, icon criticism, the study explored the narratives, interpretations, and evaluative perspectives of various stakeholders, including the artist, worshippers, and critics. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key participants, including ministers, laity, and religious students, to gather qualitative insights into how the artworks are perceived and how they influence the worship experience. The interviews, conducted with full ethical considerations of consent, confidentiality, and privacy, were recorded and transcribed for analysis. These conversations aimed to understand the theological, aesthetic, and personal impressions of the artworks and their role in mediating the spiritual experience.

3.3. Data Collection

The data collection involved:

- Participant observation: The researcher employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating field notes, images, videos, and audio recordings to capture the cultural, historical, and liturgical contexts of the artworks. By engaging in participant observation, typically in ceremonies and devotional services of the communities, the researcher gained rich, first-hand insights into ritual practices, community dynamics, and the impact of artistic representations.
- Semi-structured interviews: The researcher involved 73 participants, including ministers, laity, religious students, the artist Joy Elamkunnapuzha, and critics of intercultural art. Semi-structured interviews focused on how artworks are conceived, received, and function in worship settings. The process began with an informed consent briefing,

followed by interviews with the artist and later with key associates and critics. After the initial analysis, participants were revisited for clarification, ensuring accuracy and depth in the study's interpretations.

- Recording and documentation: All interviews and observations were recorded with digital cameras and audio recorders, with data securely stored on a hard drive and transcribed using automated and manual methods for accuracy.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which allowed the researcher to identify and code recurring themes, shared meanings, and the relationships between the participants' experiences and the visual representations. Nvivo software was used to process the data, ensuring systematic coding and categorization. Visual data, including photos and video footage, were incorporated to complement the textual analysis and provide a comprehensive view of the role of the artworks.

In the later stage of the analysis, the author adopted a shift from the initial use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to thematic analysis, justified by the thematic coherence observed across the interviews. Although IPA is designed to explore individual stories and personal interpretations in a case-by-case manner, the author found that the semi-structured interviews resulted in similar themes across participants, making thematic analysis more suitable for the dataset.

The adoption of thematic analysis allowed the researcher to categorize codes and themes in a structured way, reflecting the natural thematic unity present in the data. The use of Nvivo software provided a powerful tool for organizing and coding the responses, enabling both thematic categorization and the creation of participant "cases" based on attributes and demographics. This case classification introduced a quantitative dimension to the analysis, which is less common in traditional IPA but supports a more systematic exploration of the dataset.

By applying thematic analysis, the study was able to derive a phenomenological understanding of intercultural icons while integrating measurable thematic dimensions, such as the functions of intercultural art and visual affectivity. The combination of qualitative insights and quantitative rigor strengthens the research, offering a rich yet structured analysis of the themes that emerged from the interviews.

3.5. Participants

The study involved five categories of participants:

- Ministers: Clerical leaders and faculty members involved in the worship services.
- Laity: Adult worshippers from the local parish community who regularly interact with the artworks.
- Religious students: Graduate students studying at the seminaries, offering insights into their perception of the artworks.
- Artist: Joy Elamkunnappuzha, whose works are the primary focus of this study.
- Critics: Scholars and theologians who provided expert opinions on the intercultural dynamics of the artworks.

All participants were adults over 18 years of age, with a near-equal gender distribution, and the study focused solely on Christian respondents.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy for all participants. Where applicable, participants were pseudonymized in all data records, except where consent was granted for publication.

3.7. Tools and Software

- Audio-visual recording devices: For capturing observations and interviews.
- Nvivo software: For qualitative data coding and analysis.

- Adobe Premier: For editing audiovisual material to supplement the study's academic dissemination.

This comprehensive approach enabled the study to explore both the practical and interpretative dimensions of intercultural artworks, offering a nuanced understanding of their role in Christian worship.

4. Results Overview

The participants' responses revealed the complex and multifaceted roles that religious visual art plays in shaping individual and collective religious experiences. Within the scope of this paper, I focus on the range of experiences drawn from the narrative accounts of the responding participants regarding their engagement with the intercultural icons. The respondents' answers to the questions about their experience with the artworks generally pertained to their overall worship experience within the church premises and within a liturgical act. Although the survey could not comprehensively chart participants' experiential narratives on individual art pieces and visual units, most participants indicated particular attractions or representations that drew their sensory attention and mediated the worship experience. Focused on the qualitative aspects of these comments about their worship experience and how they affected the affinity or aversion of their visual sense, this appraisal of participants' experience presents the intercultural icons' actual impact on people in worship.

The analysis drew from participants' responses to a series of questions that explored their interaction with the icons, their emotional and spiritual reactions, and the role the artworks played in their prayer and contemplation. These responses were categorized into thematic headings—visual approach, visual appeal, and visual affinity—reflecting the participants' initial encounters with the icons, their aesthetic experiences, and their emotional connection to the artworks over time. These themes were shaped by Indian cultural and religious concepts, such as darshan, mandir, and sadharmyam, which were frequently referenced by participants in describing their experiences.

By structuring the analysis around these thematic categories, the study elucidated how the intercultural icons serve as spiritual mediators, evoking responses that range from delight and contemplation to discomfort and reflection. (i) Visual approach compiled the initial reactions and attitudes as individuals encountered the icons, revealing diverse ways through which they engage with the visual. (ii) Visual appeal examined the sensory and aesthetic dimensions involved in praying with the icons, providing insights into how the representations appeal to the visual sense to engage one in worship. (iii) Visual affinity explored the connecting, sometimes conflicting, emotions that individuals experienced with the icons during a long-term worship condition. The headings and the corresponding classification of comments were motivated by the Hindi and general Indian concepts that the participants had mentioned during the interview and emerged during the analysis of the transcripts.

4.1. Darshan: Visual Approach

In many instances, the participants used the Hindi term darshan to speak of their experience with the visual images. Darshan is commonly referred to as the way a devotee beholds the transcendent divine, primarily through the eyes. In Hindu ritual habits, darshan is the most popular rite of expressing one's devotion and experiencing the proximity of the divine. A Hindu devotee, for example, speaks of his/her visit to the temple as going for a darshan, a vision of the divine. The name Darsana mandir for one of the two case study centers comes from this ritual connotation of the term darshan. Due to the popularity of the term in Indian culture, the term was used many times in the study interviews, especially when narrating experiences with the visual aspects of the representations. The comments at most times revealed how the participants approached the visual in the churches. It was deemed appropriate to assess the comments based on their feature of approaching the visual, which highlighted the participants' initial experience with the representations.

For many, the discovery of the interreligious and intercultural nature of the images came as a surprise. Recalling their initial sight of the visual representations, they characterized the encounter in terms of “new experience”, “strange view”, “pleasantly surprising”, and “confusing in a charming way”. Some participants noted that they approached the images captivated by their charm of simple and identifiable beauty. The laity, in general, described how the new outlook of the Christian imagery left a deep impression. A participant described the impact the first sight of the “dancing Christ” had on her,

“I was, at first, startled to see Christ in the Natraj form and questioned whether it fitted well there in the sanctuary. Then I found the entire structure of the sanctuary was at the level of the people in the nave and the Christ image was so relatable. I was moved with the new sight of the Lord.”

Among the religious student participants, overall, there was a general experience of initial shock upon encountering the main images of Christ in both churches. Many of them expressed that the initial surprise motivated a sense of reflection rather than a devotional disposition. Most participants in this category felt that the individual units of the representations in the churches were well aligned with the total design scheme, which featured intercultural themes for a purpose. This awareness among the religious students helped them to approach the visual as icons for veneration and meditation.

4.2. Mandir: Visual Appeal

Mandir is another term associated with the ritual of darshan. It pertains to the appeal of a representation of the divine. In Hindi terminology, mandir literally means gladdening or pleasing. The term denotes a spiritual delight that results from a darshan of the Divine. Temples in India are called mandir as they represent spiritual delight. The experiences of the participants with regard to the visual representations in this study could be assessed based on the spiritual delight they provided to individuals who worshiped with them. The visual appeal of the representations that contributed to worshipers’ spiritual delight was influenced by their aesthetic quality, religious connotation, and spiritual ambiance which the faithful admired or disliked. Classifying people’s comments on experiences with the appeal of the visual representations, the second section in this study was accordingly titled mandir to highlight the spiritual character.

The appeal of visual images extending beyond the initial approach involved a complex interplay of aesthetics, emotion, and personal resonance. Within the narratives of the participants, which expressed admiration for the artworks, diverse dimensions of appeal were evident. Many participants found the visual images to be aesthetically pleasing, with their artistic features inciting a sense of wonder and admiration. Their appreciation expressed how the representations served as a source of visual delight when they gathered for worship in the churches. Most participants felt that the church settings were conducive to the type of songs and bhajans they used to sing and chant in the church with the accompaniment of local musical instruments during the community celebrations. The visual representations reflected their celebration and acts of worship.

For example, the image at the center of Darsana chapel, the epiphany Christ, (Figure 1), which was the most mentioned element among the representations, drew stark experiential indicators. While many found the image to bear an aesthetically pleasing appearance, the posture of dance was generally regarded as “distasteful”. It is important to note that the artist’s portrayal of the figure in gandharva (flying celestial being) posture had not been perceived as such but seen as “dancing Christ”. Its association with the Natraj image of Hinduism further censured the visual appeal.

Most respondents, however, felt that the space and the visual scheme of the main church were conducive to the public services conducted there. A participant narrated his experience in the church relative to the community celebrations:

“The church and the representations are static for me. It has a natural aura of sacredness. I come to the church to meditate and make my prayers. But,

the church awakens when there is a community worshipping here. Then my experience is different. The prayers, the visuals, and the music all contribute to a special feeling of upliftment.”

4.3. *Sadharmyam: Visual Affinity*

The third section of this analysis, which involved assessing people’s affinity for emotional connection to the images, featured religious sentiments associated with the community’s collective faith. In the conversations related to religious affiliation and identification of the visual symbols, some participants mentioned the concept of *sadharmyam*, meaning the marriage of the right religious attitudes with the temporal conditions of one’s life. Prefixed with *sa*, which gives the sense of ‘with’ or ‘together’, *dharmyam* denotes religious sentiments associated with experiential aspects of life. This idea of aligning one’s attitudes and emotions with the sacred symbols in a religious sentiment was the main thrust of comments that revealed the participants’ affinity with the images. Analysis under *sadharmyam: visual affinity*, comprised expressions that exposed people’s affectivity with the representations in terms of their affinity or aversion. The comments in this section were rather commentaries on the respondents’ long-term association with the artworks, reflecting the unique spiritual journey and identification of their attitudes.

Participants’ narratives about their likes and dislikes in their personal and community experience of worship, and how the visuals related to the aspects of their faith, displayed a variety of responses and a complex range of experiences. Their intuitive perspectives reflected the intricate relationship between faith, personal beliefs, and attitudes. Generally, they showed that people make adjustments in their initial approach to the visual representations and their personal beliefs in light of the exposure and interaction with the symbolism over a sustained period of time.

One of the ministers pointed out,

“Many students arrive here with a prejudice about the representations. They look for the same visual ambiance that they have been familiar with since their childhood and critically approach these images with apprehension. This attitude eventually transforms after a period of exposure and familiarization.”

This perspective on the change in attitudes among student participants over a period of time was corroborated by many students’ affirmative testimonies. Many of them spoke of their gradual adjustment and tolerance for the visual elements. The initial apprehension of confusion and wonder turned to appreciation of the intercultural elements.

The survey of people’s affectivity, which indicated adjustments over a period of time, showed how they familiarized the visual representations despite a different initial impression of them. The acts of worship around the representations, which the faithful at the centers had developed as a practice, were major indicators of their spiritual and religious affinity to the visual representations. In verbal narrations of the artworks, while most participants acknowledged their affectivity for the visual elements, blatant displays of aversion were evident in samples at both centers. The obvious presence of other religious symbolism in the images seemed to trigger most of the aversive stimulation. Those with an aversive outlook on this basis did not seem to change their views even after long exposure to their worship context, raising concerns about the visual mediations of their faith. Remarkably, those with a positive outlook on the images did not emphasize the other religious elements of the visual representations. Their sentiments seemed to follow from the formal elements of the artworks, which clearly favored local artistry and craft. The central sanctuary images at the churches, for example, were liked for their distinct depictions of Christ with contextual relevance.

5. The Icon of the Dancing Christ

In this section, I focus on the participants’ interpretations and comments regarding the epiphany Christ, the figure of the dancing Christ (Figure 1), to illustrate how worshippers dynamically engage with this image reflecting the stages of apprehension described above.

The Epiphany Christ icon represented a powerful fusion of Christian eschatological themes and intercultural symbolism, particularly its features reminiscent of Hindu tradition. Its visual elements sparked diverse reactions among participants, highlighting the icon's role in provoking thought and fostering deeper spiritual reflection. This icon serves as a unique case for examining how intercultural visual representations function in rituals, challenging conventional faith understandings and shaping communal identity.

The Epiphany Christ icon, conceived by artist Joy Elamkunnappuzha as the central icon of Darsana mandir in 1988, is a plaster relief sculpture that combines a variety of iconographic and formal elements, drawing from both Christian and intercultural traditions. This figure of Christ, in *gandharva* posture, is adorned in a *dupatta* and a mantle shawl, signifying cultural integration with Indian attire. Surrounding Christ is a ring of fire, symbolizing the presence of the Holy Spirit, accentuated by a descending dove, a common Christian motif representing divine grace. One of Christ's hands holds fire, evoking divine power and eschatological themes, while the other forms the *varada mudra*, a symbolic gesture of blessing and grace oriented toward the worshippers below.

Beneath the central figure, a relief sculpture presents architectural symbols from various religious traditions, interspersed with images of people in prayer. This array signifies the universality of faith and the unity of worshippers across different religions. The use of white sand for the central figure contrasts with the dark sand grain backdrop, creating a striking visual effect that highlights the centrality of Christ in the composition. The sculpture is framed by a structure made of wood, metal, and colored glass, designed in the form of a mandala, a geometric design often associated with spiritual symbolism in Eastern traditions. The frame is further embellished with hanging oil lamps and brass decorations, reminiscent of the worship elements found in Hindu temples.

For Christian believers, the icon symbolized biblical revelations and echoed themes of Christ's baptism and transfiguration, with the Holy Spirit represented by a dove within a fiery halo. The flames signified the gifts of the Spirit, while the figures of worshippers below symbolized humanity's adoration. The icon conveyed the eschatological belief that all people, regardless of faith or culture, would unite in eternity symbolizing the biblical notion of 'lightening coming from the east' as revelation regarding the second coming of Christ.

Many participants likened the image to the *Natraj* pose of dancing Shiva, a symbol of renewal in Hindu tradition. *Natraj* is a cultural symbol widely recognized in India as the epitome of fine arts, especially in the art of dance. Meaning "artist king" or "the great artist", *Natraj* is traditionally associated with the Hindu god Shiva, the 'destroyer', who performs a cosmic dance to annihilate and renew the universe. When the Epiphany Christ icon was compared to the dance of Shiva, many participants perceived serious religious implications. Concerns of syncretism and the potential 'vandalism' of sacred religious symbols were raised, as participants questioned the blending of Christian and Hindu imagery. However, some, particularly students, embraced the connection, viewing Christ's portrayal in a *Natraj*-like posture through the lens of Hindu philosophy, which highlights the creative, unifying, and renewing aspects of Shiva. This openness reflects a broader affinity for interpreting religious symbols in ways that transcend traditional boundaries and connect diverse spiritual concepts.

A student remarked that the initial resemblance to a Hindu temple felt disorienting, but over time, the practice of "meditation under His gaze" fostered spiritual growth. Similarly, while many laity initially found the representation difficult to reconcile with Christian imagery, familiarity and deeper understanding eventually led to acceptance. Within the participants' verbalizations on how the intercultural features were approached, the visual apprehension of other religious symbols, cultural expressions, and contextual realities alongside the Christian insights emerged as a provocation of thought, eliciting contemplation and stimulating introspection. The participants recounted how the distinct features often 'challenged' conventional understanding, inciting them to question and explore nuances of their faith.

One participant's evolving perception of the icon serves as a telling example of how intercultural visual representations can challenge and ultimately enrich spiritual understanding within a worshipping community. Initially, the participant remarked, "The image of Jesus with fire reminds me of the Hindu figure Natraj, and it doesn't connect easily with my Christian faith. At first, I found it distasteful". However, with time and deeper reflection, their view shifted: "But now that I'm familiar with it and its meaning, I see more to it. It reminds me of Christ's Second coming, and the fierce form reflects what I imagine as the final epiphany" (Interview, 18 February 2019). This transformation underscores the capacity of intercultural symbols to provoke initial discomfort but, through familiarity and interpretation, foster a more profound spiritual connection.

6. Experience-Based Affectivity Measurement

The next phase of analysis quantitatively measured participants' responses to the visual representations, focusing on three key stages: visual approach, visual appeal, and visual affinity. The survey aimed to assess how participants initially engaged with the artworks, how aesthetically appealing they found them, and how these visuals contributed to their religious and spiritual experiences. Participants' responses ranged from aversion to deep devotional connection.

The study identified five categories to capture participants' affectivity:

- Mangala: representing spiritual delight and a high sense of sacredness.
- Sraddha: indicating prayerfulness and the ability to evoke faith.
- Bhajana: reflecting a general devotional attitude towards the images.
- Dhyān: associated with contemplative reflection prompted by the visual elements.
- Aversion: denoting discord or negative reactions to the visual experience.

Participants rated their responses on a five-point scale, with mangala indicating the highest level of appreciation and aversion the lowest. This scale helped quantify the varying degrees of spiritual engagement elicited by the intercultural icons.

6.1. Statements Overview

Participants responded to the following statements reflecting changes and differences in people's perceptions upon continued engagement with the icons. The statements focused on three key aspects of visual engagement: initial perception, current visual appeal, and the connection between the images and personal faith. These categories provided a structured way to measure participants' evolving relationship with the icons, both aesthetically and spiritually.

Visual approach (darshan): What was your perception of the images when you first saw them in the church? Participants reflected on their first impression of the images when they encountered them in the church with ratings ranging from spiritual contentment (5) to aversion (1).

Visual appeal (mandir): How do you rate your perception of the visual appeal of the representations now that you are familiar with them? Participants were asked to evaluate how their perception of the images' visual appeal has evolved with continued familiarity on the scale ranging from spiritual contentment (5) to aversion (1).

Visual affinity (sadharmyam): How connected and related are these visual images to your faith when you consider them for your personal and community worship? This statement explored how connected participants feel to these images in the context of personal and communal worship again on the same scale.

6.2. Visual Affectivity Diagram

According to the participants' responses, each interview transcript was analyzed and categorized using the case function in Nvivo, allowing for a structured overview of the results in a quantitative format. Each category of affective responses—mangala, sraddha, bhajana, dhyān, and aversion—was assigned a numerical value to quantify the participants'

experiences. Specifically, mangala was given a value of 5, sraddha a value of 4, bhajana a value of 3, dhyan a value of 2, and aversion a value of 1.

The aggregate and average scores for each category were calculated, and the data were segregated by participant groups—ministers, students, and laity. This method enabled a comparative analysis of how different groups approached, engaged with, and related to the intercultural icons in worship. The Nvivo case classification system provided a visual representation of these measurements, reflecting each group’s perception and emotional response to the visual elements in the worship spaces.

The aggregate and corresponding mean values of each category of participants are represented in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Stages in affectivity.

Category	Total Participants	Darshan	Mandir	Sadharmyam
Ministers	11	35–3.18	47–4.36	51–4.72
Religious Students	23	68–2.95	101–4.39	83–3.6
Laity	30	102–3.4	88–2.93	112–3.73

The five-point value scale, applied to all three sections of the experience narratives, mainly indicated how participants related to the visuals in different stages of their interaction with them. The aggregate of the recorded values represents how each group perceived the visual experience and how the perceptions differed over a period of time indicated by the difference in values in the successive columns.

The following diagram of mean values from the above tables shows how each group’s perceptions differ from one another (Figure 2).

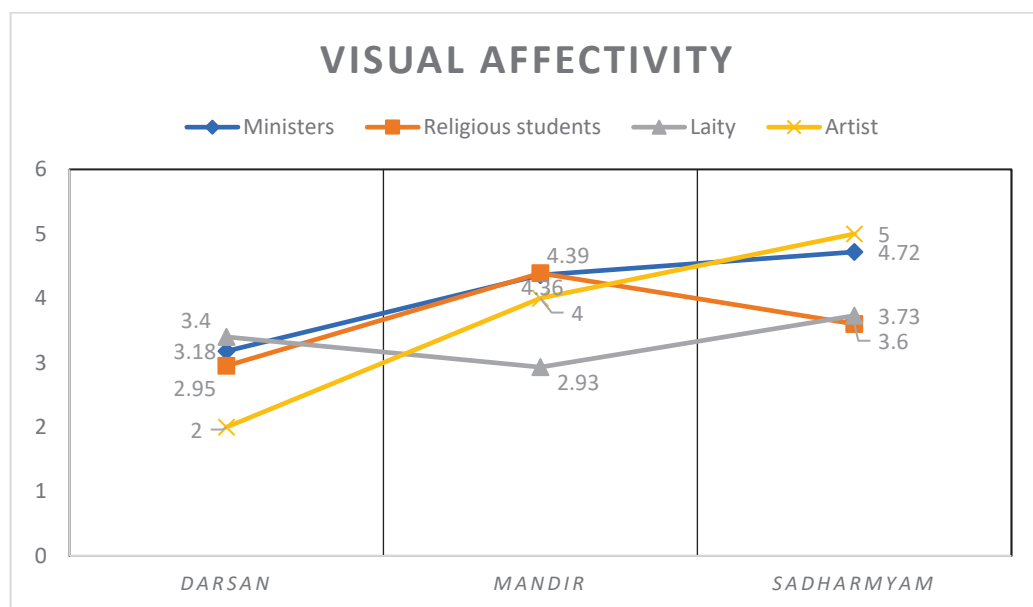


Figure 2. Visual affectivity in icon engagement.

7. Discussion: Affectivity Experience

The survey of respondents’ experiences revealed how each group developed their understanding of approach, appeal, and affinity toward the icons. Drawing on qualitative insights from the participants, the survey was designed around three conceptual stages to map their engagement with the visual representations. These stages—darshan, mandir, and sadharmyam—corresponded to how respondents experienced approaching the icons,

finding their appeal, and integrating them into their faith. In each stage, respondents rated their experiences using a 5-point Likert scale, allowing for a nuanced expression of their feelings about the icons.

The survey results can be examined from three distinct perspectives: first, the trends and patterns observed in the data across the different respondent groups; second, how the data for each stage represented the respondents' emotional and spiritual engagement with the icons; and third, the role of *dhyān* (contemplation/provocation, scale value 2) in mediating the overall experience, highlighting its influence on participants' deeper apprehension of the visual representations.

7.1. Data Trends Among the Groups

The visual diagram presented a complex pattern of progress in participants' emotional and spiritual engagement with the intercultural icons. A comparison of trends revealed a disconnect between the artist's ideal progression and the actual development of perspectives among the main groups.

Ministers tended to align closely with the artist's visionary intent, focusing on ideal interpretations rather than their own personal experiences. Religious students found the icons cognitively engaging, using them for critical reflection on their faith, but showed little progress in developing a deeper religious affiliation with the visuals. Their preference remained with traditional Christian imagery, despite their interest in learning the formal and symbolic aspects of the intercultural icons.

The laity had a different journey, initially appreciating the icons for their visual charm and prayerful nature, with less focus on their contemplative or provocative aspects. As they progressed to the appeal stage, they began to seek meaning in the icons, influenced by ministerial guidance. While their engagement deepened, the survey revealed that the laity did not reach the level of *mangala* (spiritual contentment), and there was no desire to replicate the images for personal devotion. This suggests that while the icons' aesthetic appeal fostered initial interest, deeper spiritual engagement remained limited, raising questions about what elements could cultivate a more lasting emotional and spiritual connection.

7.2. Data Trends in the Stages

A stage-based analysis of the groups revealed how respondents' experiences with the intercultural icons evolved through the stages of *darshan* (approach), *mandir* (appeal), and *sadharmyam* (affinity), highlighting differences shaped by contextual and demographic factors. While each stage influenced the others, they also reflected distinct aspects of engagement with the icons.

In the approach stage (*darshan*), respondents primarily viewed the icons as devotional objects, with varying approval or disapproval. The artist's intent for the visuals to provoke contemplation was not fully realized, as the symbols were not immediately apparent to most. Notably, students from Hindi-speaking areas showed more favorable reactions, while those from traditional Christian backgrounds were more divided. The laity generally appreciated the icons' aesthetic appeal but struggled with interpreting them within familiar devotional practices.

The appeal stage (*mandir*) reflected deeper engagement. Respondents began to find meaning in the icons, with many transitioning to a more contemplative view. Instruction from ministers played a key role in helping participants understand the icons, which enhanced their devotional engagement. This stage underscored the icons' educational and prayerful functions.

In the final affinity stage (*sadharmyam*), the survey showed a disconnect between the artist's and ministers' goal of achieving spiritual contentment (*mangala*) and the actual experiences of the worshippers. Most respondents did not reach this level, but there was an upward trend in engagement. Over time, the initial novelty of the icons gave way to a more nuanced understanding, though full integration into long-term devotional practices

remained limited. This highlights the importance of aligning new visual elements with the existing faith framework of the community.

7.3. Mediation of Dhyān, Provocation/Contemplation

A key element in the respondents' engagement with the icons was the provocative and contemplative function, identified as dhyān in the survey, which incited reflection—both positive and negative. Dhyān played a mediating role across stages of approach, appeal, and affinity, significantly impacting the overall results. It often influenced the final impression by lowering the average scores due to its position below the middle rating of bhajana (value 3). While it reflected deeper engagement for many participants, it also overshadowed a minority of highly positive experiences (value 5: mangala).

For some, the icons sparked positive introspection and enriched their faith by encouraging deeper contemplation. For others, especially those concerned with syncretism, the unfamiliar symbolism prompted a more critical view. Students showed a high rate of dhyān in the approach stage, which later elevated to prayerful reflection (sraddha) in the appeal stage. The laity, initially focused on visual appeal, marked dhyān in the appeal stage and progressed to a higher level of affinity (sadharmyam).

Demographic differences also shaped responses, with traditional Christian worshippers being more critical initially, while respondents from Hindi-speaking regions engaged in deeper reflection after an initial positive impression. The artist's intent for the icons to provoke contemplation was supported by ministers and aligned with the educational aim of fostering spiritual connections.

Dhyān highlighted the cognitive approach in shaping worshippers' experiences, showcasing how the unique artistic style and reflective engagement influenced meaning making and deepened spiritual connections.

8. Limitations

This study provides valuable insights into the role of intercultural icons in select North Indian Christian communities, but it acknowledges several limitations:

- **Sample size and external validity:** The focus on a specific community limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Future studies with larger, more geographically diverse samples could enhance understanding.
- **Data collection range:** Relying on self-reported data and observations introduces potential biases in memory and interpretation. Involving multiple researchers could improve data quality and objectivity.
- **Focus on homogeneous communities:** The study centered on two Catholic communities, limiting the scope of the icons' liturgical significance across broader Christian contexts. Future research could explore comparative analyses between traditional and localized Christian communities and across interreligious environments.
- **Unintended interpretations and outliers:** Outlier experiences and unintended interpretations influenced the data, as the study did not fully mitigate subjective biases. A framework based on the intended visionary meanings could provide a more cohesive analysis.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a strong framework for exploring the dynamics between intercultural art, faith, and cultural context.

9. Conclusions

By focusing on the lived experiences of worshippers and the impact of these intercultural visuals, this study elucidated the ways in which the popular and cultural manifestation of mystical ideals mediates ritual affectivity and religious belonging. It can contribute to the broader discourse on liturgy, art, and mysticism in multi-religious contexts. Other religious symbols, integrated into Christian worship through intercultural icons, are visionary creativity and are utilized to provoke contemplation and enhance the spiritual experience. The incorporation of symbols like mudras and mandalas, rooted in

Hindu traditions, in the representation of Christian icons offered a unique lens through which Christian worshippers engage with the mysteries of their faith. These symbols act as conduits for reflection and meaning making, fostering a deeper sense of connection to the divine while also creating opportunities for dialogue between Christian and other spiritual traditions.

However, the reception of these symbols is complex and often marked by tension. While some worshippers view them as enriching and facilitating a broader, more inclusive approach to Christian spirituality, others express concerns about syncretism and the potential dilution of Christian identity. Despite these concerns, the study demonstrates that many participants were able to move beyond initial apprehensions, finding in these symbols a pathway to deeper contemplation and engagement with their faith.

The use of cultural symbols in Christian liturgy reveals the potential for intercultural dialogue and aesthetics to reshape and enhance ritual affectivity and faith experiences. Yet, it also underscores the need for careful discernment in how such symbols are interpreted and incorporated into communal worship. As these symbols continue to be used, they offer Christian communities a distinctive way to explore the mystery of faith and find connections to the unifying forces of mysticism beyond religious affiliations while also posing important questions about the balance between cultural adaptation and maintaining doctrinal integrity and religious identity.

Supplementary Materials: Film S1: “Inculturational Art Study Trailer”, 2 min @ https://youtu.be/0_jZk8s1hv8. Film S2: “Darsana mandir: Gladdening Sacred Vision”, 38 min @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeUelHucYY>. Film S3: “Samanvaya Devgudi: Sacred Dwelling of Harmony”, 12 min @ <https://youtu.be/UDAXI2xMYZU>.

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Article

Merton's Unity of Action and Contemplation in Transpersonal Perspective

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Abstract: Adopting a transdisciplinary approach, with specific emphasis on the post-Jungian transpersonal psychological theories on the 'Spectrum of Human Consciousness', this paper introduces a transpersonal psychological thread of understanding of 'Mystical Consciousness' through an interreligious field of comparative religious approaches to action, contemplation and non-action. This paper draws on Merton's interreligious contemplative thinking in relation to three major world religious mystical traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and mystical Islam/Sufism and elucidates comparative insights with the Christian mystical-contemplative tradition, akin to the 'mystical contemplation' of Evelyn Underhill. This paper introduces and applies the transpersonal perspective to the scholarly field of mysticism. The reader is invited to consider how Merton may have responded or written about interreligious contemplative depth mysticism in terms of his own writings on 'pure consciousness', had he had the benefit of the language of the transpersonal models of consciousness. Finally, the reader is left with a contemplative question at the 'heart' of mysticism—does the ancient sculpture of the *Sleeping Hermaphrodite* helpfully represent an art-theological symbolic analogy for the inner repose of an illumined soul, one with God's Unity, in whose awakened consciousness through depth mystical contemplation, action occurs as an extended manifestation, a total *gestalt* of contemplative solitudinous action?

Keywords: Merton; mysticism; transpersonal; action; contemplation; Buddhism; Hinduism; Sufi; Islamic; consciousness

1. Introduction—Transpersonal 'Unity Consciousness'

*The Sleeping Hermaphrodite*¹ (Figure 1) serves as an opening art-theological metaphor for the depth of unity consciousness in the human *psyche*² explored in the transdisciplinary³ approach to this paper on action and contemplation. I will explore a post-modern transpersonal psychological dimensional understanding of mystical unitive consciousness, wherein poles of duality, such as male/female, yin/yang and, for the purpose of this Special Issue focus, action/contemplation become 'one' in unity consciousness. I will be elucidating how the perspective of post-Jungian transpersonal psychology, (which is a post-modern trajectory of psychological spectral thought that integrates the spiritual dimensions of the *psyche*), in articulating the state of unity consciousness, is interreligiously compatible with various modern/post-modern mystical thinkers, such as Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–2022), Swami Sivananda (1887–1967), Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927), Thomas Merton (1915–1968) and Richard Rohr (1943–), representing the mystical depth-dimensions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufi-Islamic mysticism and Christianity, respectively, to articulate variously that in the context of the perennially contested debate within mysticism of 'action and contemplation', it is experientially possible to, 'Rest in "working hard" and also do and be "resting"! (Brandman 2022, p. 389).



Figure 1. The Sleeping Hermaphrodite, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

As the transpersonal psychological perspective is lesser known within mainstream mysticism scholarship, the first half of this paper will focus on outlining in ‘thick description’ (Schneiders 2005, pp. 49–60) the post-Jungian transpersonal models of consciousness and the *psyche* which form the basis of the transpersonal perspective mooted upon the question of action and contemplation.

Thereafter, I will apply the transpersonal understanding of transpersonal ‘hermaphroditic’ unity consciousness to the interreligious perspectives of action and contemplation found in Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufism and as deeply reflected upon by Thomas Merton.

2. The Transpersonal: Trans-/Interdisciplinary Academia

The transpersonal perspective in academia has burgeoned from its early inception in schools of Jungian and post-Jungian psychology together with its applied professional disciplines of transpersonal psychotherapy. Both facilitate depth psychological processes of psycho-spiritual personal transformation in transpersonal states of non-ordinary ‘transpersonal’ (beyond the personal) levels of human consciousness, including, but not limited to, liminal, transliminal (Clarke 2001) or mystical states of union or unitive consciousness. However, the transpersonal perspective is no longer the exclusive domain of psychological or psychotherapeutic schools of thought. Indeed, such an inter-/transdisciplinary overarching perspective was explored in the 24th International EUROTAS Conference at Oxford University in September 2024, ‘Embodied Consciousness, Psyche & Soul in Research and Practice’, which was led by Les Lancaster, Professor Emeritus of Liverpool John Moores University and author of *Approaches to Consciousness—The Marriage of Science and Mysticism* (Lancaster 2004). The transpersonal perspective is currently being used across a plethora of academic and professional disciplines. For example, it is legitimately applicable to refer to transpersonal gerontology, in the scientific study of old age from a transpersonal perspective. Further, the transpersonal perspective is already being applied to diverse areas of study such as neuroscience, quantum physics, sociology, insomnia, grief, peacebuilding, psychiatry and ecology, in addition to psychology, psychotherapy, parapsychology coaching and counselling. By extension, therefore, the scholarly fields of mysticism, mystical theology and theologies generally can similarly augment their fields of transdisciplinarity in considering the transpersonal perspective. Certainly, post-modern scholarship would be remiss not to address the transpersonal’s burgeoning remit, especially in the context of post-modern transdisciplinarity, as the overarching word ‘transpersonal’

which is embraced across divergent disciplines is seen to be inherently and inevitably transdisciplinary in the breadth of its scholarly scope.

Therefore, it is mooted that one future transdisciplinary trajectory of mysticism scholarship will be a transpersonal mysticism, a transpersonal mystical theology and even an all-encompassing transpersonal theology, which has as its focus the understanding of transpersonal levels of consciousness in the *psyche*, explored further below in the post-Jungian context. Importantly, the suggestion of transpersonal mysticism is not as innovative as it may first appear. Indeed, it follows Bernard McGinn's 'modest proposal' (McGinn 2008, pp. 44–63) that 'the category of consciousness, embracing experience but also extending beyond it, may provide a more helpful way of investigating mysticism and its relation to spirituality' (McGinn 2008, p. 59). McGinn advocates his 'modest proposal' by elucidating two main areas in which an understanding of consciousness as applied to mysticism may be beneficial to mysticism scholarship. Powerfully, McGinn says,

This approach seeks to avoid the danger involved in restricting the "real" mystical element of religion to the first level of consciousness, that is, the reception of the gift of God's presence in feeling, or basic inner experience. It also critiques views of mystical consciousness that tend to emphasize the affective dimension of direct contact with God to the detriment of the intellective aspect . . . the conclusion emerges that a more extensive analysis of the full range of the activities of the human subject as they are transformed and reoriented through the presence of God acting directly within the subject will help us gain deeper understanding of the mystical encounter between God and human. (ibid.)

As transpersonal psychology is the academic field established to further scientific and empirical research into human consciousness, with established MSc and PhD degrees available in Consciousness Studies, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology,⁴ the transpersonal perspective is the very inter-/transdisciplinary field of study into human consciousness that McGinn suggests may 'help us gain deeper understanding of the mystical encounter between God and human'. Therefore, I will outline the transpersonal model of the human *psyche* to show specifically how post-Jungian developments reveal the *psyche* as a 'Spectrum of Consciousness' (Wilber 1993). Expanding upon Bernard McGinn's more encompassing, interdisciplinary perspective of mysticism scholarship which recognises that it can 'be approached philosophically, theologically, and psychologically' (McGinn 1991, pp. 263–343, as cited in Nelstrop 2015, p. 497) and Louise Nelstrop's inclusivity of its interreligious dimension in that mysticism scholarship 'encompasses both many religions and none' (Nelstrop 2015, p. 497), transpersonal psychology presents mysticism scholarship with an exciting new paradigm for further and deeper integration of understanding consciousness in mysticism scholarship. Transpersonal psychology's perspective of mysticism scholarship, therefore, deepens a scholarly appreciation of Merton's understanding of 'the development of man's deepest capacities' (Merton 1998, p. 162) in the universal human capacity for conscious union with God/Divine in the depth of the 'spectrum of consciousness' in the human *psyche*. Merton's interreligious leanings in contemplative depth mysticism (akin to Underhill's combined use of 'mystical contemplation' (Underhill 2011, p. 29) in practical mysticism) find complementarity in the transpersonal, especially where Merton specifically writes of '*pure consciousness*' (Merton 1968, pp. 15–32). In this article, I am applying the transpersonal perspective to Merton's understanding of action and contemplation as an exemplar of this developing transpersonal scholarship. Therefore, Merton's thought is used as a theoretical lens through which to view mysticism from a transpersonal perspective in transdisciplinarity. Merton's interest in psycho-analysis and interreligious depth mystical theologies gave rise to the meditation that prompted this article: What if Merton, in writing to articulate his contemplative states of 'pure consciousness', had the

benefit of post-modern transpersonal language that articulates precise language to describe the depth of nuanced states of human unity consciousness in a 'spectrum of consciousness'?

3. The Transpersonal Model: Consciousness and the Psyche

Transpersonal psychology's understanding of the human *psyche* is of being what Ken Wilber sums up as a 'Spectrum of Consciousness' (ibid.) spanning pre-personal, personal, collective, transpersonal and transcendental dimensions of the *psyche*. Crucially, across the spectrum of psychological and its applied psychotherapeutic models of thought and practice, the very word *psyche* is used in a broad-definitional way that encompasses nuanced dimensions of meaning from 'soul' to 'mind', in contradistinction to its more usual understanding of 'soul' within mysticism. However, the definitional context of the *psyche* will differ depending upon the specific orientation of a school of psychological/psychotherapeutic thought, whose spectrum broadly ranges from psycho-analytical, psycho-dynamic, humanistic, person-centred, gestalt, existential, transpersonal and integrative/integral models/schools. The specific orientation of this paper brings into focus the post-Jungian transpersonal dimension of psychological/psychotherapeutic thought, as applied to mysticism and mystical theological academic disciplines in transdisciplinarity.

Concurring with Peter Tyler's view of the more recent meeting and dialogue between theologians and psychologists in their interpretations of the *psyche*,⁵ (whose own scholarly expertise, more unusually, like my own, includes both mystical theology and professional psychotherapeutic models of understanding), I argue that the transdisciplinarity of mystical theology (which integrally includes theological, transpersonal and other perspectival dimensions), requires a more nuanced reflection upon what is understood by the term *psyche* across academic disciplines in order to avoid abyssal misunderstandings. In mystical scholarship, the term *psyche* is generally understood in relation to its traditional meaning of 'soul'. Therefore, scholars may profoundly misunderstand psychological models of understanding where the term *psyche* is predominantly used in post-modernity to refer to the 'mind', but which can additionally refer, confusingly, either to the 'mind' only, the 'soul' only, or the 'mind-soul' or 'mind-soul-spirit' continuum! How this trajectory of the divergence of meanings occurred is an interesting one to unpick but, further, an essential one for enhanced trans-/interdisciplinary understandings, especially in the context of navigating mystical texts that use the word *psyche* across both trans-/interdisciplinary fields of psychology and mysticism. Tyler elucidates that the journey of reference to the soul can be traced from Plato to Psychology: 'Plato's discourse is a story of the soul that will thread its way . . . through later Christian doctrine to . . . psychoanalysis and the present day retrieval of the 'story of the soul' in . . . James Hillman and Thomas Moore' (Tyler 2016, p. 28). However, how did the word *psyche* come to have a more prevalent meaning of 'mind' over 'soul' in post-modern psychological/psychotherapeutic thought?

Importantly, Jung's original German words were *Seele* and *Geist* (Stein 2010, p. 133) (meaning 'soul' and 'spirit', respectively), following Freud (Bettleheim 1983). However, of crucial significance is that *Seele* was initially translated into English as 'mind', rather than 'soul' (ibid.). Bruno Bettleheim laments as follows:

Of all the mistranslations of Freud's phraseology, none has hampered our understanding of his humanistic views more than the elimination of his references to the soul (*die Seele*) . . . translations make us believe that he is talking about our mind, our intellect . . .; namely, *geistig*, which means "of the mind", or "of the intellect". If Freud had meant *geistig*, he would have written *geistig*. (Bettleheim 1983, pp. 70–71)

Therefore, in mistranslating *Seele* as 'mind', rather than 'soul', (possibly in order to make Freud and Jung's work more acceptable to the prevailing medical model of its day,

at a time when psycho-analysis was viewed with scepticism in its relative infancy), Western psychological understanding has been viewed with a more secular hue (Bettleheim 1983, pp. 65–81). Naturally, this has had significant ramifications for the word *psyche* in contemporary Western theological thought, especially in the burgeoning interdisciplinary academic discipline of Christian Spirituality⁶ which integrates psychological understandings and other disciplines with traditional theologies. Indeed, Thomas Moore's influential transpersonal book *Care of the Soul* (Moore 2003) confusingly defines the soul in terms of more mental/emotional processes, as Moore's definition of 'soul' asserts that "'Soul' is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves' (Moore 2003, p. 5). Further, Moore asserts that he does not 'use the word [soul] . . . as an object of religious belief or . . . with immortality' (Moore 2003, p. 5). Therefore, any narrow translation of *psyche* as meaning only mind and not soul will have had a profoundly narrowing effect in shaping contemporary trans-/interdisciplinary thought on the accuracy of complete understandings of the *psyche*, variously as 'mind', 'soul' or a 'mind–soul–spirit continuum'.

Although a thorough re-evaluation/re-translation of what Freud and Jung originally intended by the use of the word *Seele* might inject new life and debate into a contemporary post-modern re-evaluation of the psychological understandings of the word *psyche*, which currently refers predominantly to the human mind, the reality is that 'the horse has already bolted the proverbial stable'! The use of the word *psyche* within various psychological/psychotherapeutic schools of thought that now refer predominantly to the *psyche* as 'mind' is firmly established. Therefore, the contemporary reality is that the word *psyche* broadly refers more often to the 'soul' within mysticism/mystical theology, yet as 'mind' in most psychologies, *except for* transpersonal models which include 'soul' in the 'mind–soul–spirit' continuum, upon which I will now expound in relation to unity consciousness in the depth of the *psyche*.

4. The Transpersonal Psyche

The word *psyche*, therefore, seems to hold a potential trans-/interdisciplinary abyssal *impasse* between understandings/interpretations of the *psyche* as 'soul' and/or 'mind', unless the word *psyche* is seen as having, not merely multiple meanings, as finely articulated by Tyler, (especially for the prevailing definitional-level academic interest within mystical scholarship), but as a word that holds full, burgeoning possibilities of understanding the *psyche* as a 'spectrum of consciousness' of the mind–soul–spirit continuum, as articulated in transpersonal psychologies. Transpersonal theories are not merely academic-only theories/models of the *psyche* but rather experientially informed theories/models of the *psyche*, which are then applied in experiential psychotherapeutic professional practice involving the interpsychic interplay in the therapy room that unearths unconscious intrapsychic complexes of the client revealed through the relational *psyches*. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, post-Jungian transpersonal insights reveal new ways of discovering and understanding the psycho-spiritual depth dimensions of the individual and collective human *psyche*, in the sense of the mind–soul–spirit continuum or, to add a depth profundity which is beyond the scope of this paper, the body–mind–soul–spirit continuum.

Beyond the significance of the definitional, namely that the word *psyche* (Greek: *psukhē*, meaning, breath/life/soul) can mean either/both 'mind' or 'soul',⁷ the transpersonal dimensional understanding of the *psyche* is crucial to a nuanced understanding of our interiority of the *psyche* in terms of our identity or sense of 'self', which transpersonal models of understanding reveal as a profound spectrum of consciousness and corresponding dimensions of 'self'.⁸ The transpersonal, therefore, adds a depth understanding to the contemplative dimension of mysticism, often articulated as the interior path/s to union with God, as in the mysticism of the 'Divine Within' (Davies 1988). Notably, the transper-

sonal dimensional understandings of the *psyche* shed light on how and why it is possible for human beings to reach/attain/experience various levels of mystical states, ultimately leading to that elusive and ineffable mystery of the soul's union with God. Transpersonal psychology is mooted as an exciting, revelatory dimension of an ever-deepening and experientially informed perspectival understanding of mysticism and mystical theology in trans-/interdisciplinarity. To understand this, we must first recapitulate Jungian psychology of the Archetype of the Self, before then considering post-Jungian developments on the understanding of the 'spectrum of consciousness' of the human *psyche* and the ensuing understandings of the more subtle dimensions of 'self', ranging from the personal self to the collective to the transpersonal and transcendental levels of self, essentially, the profound relationship between the psychological self-reflective 'ego' concept and the essential 'self' of the transpersonal/collective/transcendental dimensions of our consciousness.

Understanding transpersonal psychology's differentiations of the spectrum of consciousness and 'self' is crucial to mystical theology's depth understandings of which dimension of 'self' is being talked about in terms of either being sacrificed, denied, annihilated, lost, realised, transformed, awakened, saved, deified, divinised, sanctified, atoned, united and/or resurrected!

5. The Transpersonal Self: Post-Jungian

The Jungian approach to mysticism is well known and so this paper seeks to elucidate post-Jungian developments in the transpersonal perspective within transdisciplinarity. Without dwelling on Jungian terms, it serves as a foundational reminder that Jung described the Archetype of the Self as 'a construct that serves to express an unknowable essence which we cannot grasp as such, since by definition it transcends our powers of comprehension . . . the "God within us"'.⁹ For Jung, 'the self is transcendent' (Stein 2010, p. 152) and God a 'transcendental mystery, the mystery of all mysteries' (Clendenen 2012). The self is the 'transcendent 'centre' of the personality' (McLean 2011, p. 41). Ulanov and Dueck suggest that such numinosity of the self is reminiscent of the Christian theological concept of the '*imago Dei*' (Ulanov and Dueck 2008, p. 22), whose views of Jung compliment trans-/interdisciplinarity: 'Jung is best understood in the context of the complex web of interrelationships between modernity, religion, and psychology' (Ulanov and Dueck 2008, p. 6). However, Jung said, 'Buddha may be just as right as Jesus' (Jung 1973, as cited in Tyler 2015), showing, broadly speaking, early inter-spiritual leanings before such terms/concepts became popular parlance in transpersonal academia and practice. Interestingly, Tyler regards Jung's (inter-spiritual) perspective as a point at which Jung 'betrays his theological naïvety' (Tyler 2015), citing in support the differences regarding human salvation in Buddhism and Christianity, respectively. However, in this paper (which brings into focus a more nuanced understanding of transpersonal post-Jungian models of the self and *psyche*), contemporary, transpersonal, inter-spiritual/inter-mystical¹⁰ perspectives of 'deep ecumenism' (Fox 2000, pp. 2–25) and post Jungian views of 'Reality as Consciousness' (Wilber 1993, pp. 37–69) must be distinguished from any reductionist theological-only arguments of mere interreligious syncretism (Fox 2000, pp. 2–25), precisely because transpersonal psychology is not a theology and therefore does not operate within a theological-only disciplinary framework of thinking about such as 'syncretism'. This is a very important nuanced point within transdisciplinarity, because a heightened clarity of recognition of differences in crossdisciplinary thinking and practice is key, yet often not apparent to scholars rooted in a singular discipline. Conversely, it can be seen as more obvious to those with crossdisciplinary qualifications. Psychology is not primarily concerned with the theological considerations of whether or how the outcome of its depth understanding of the human *psyche* supports or otherwise the theologies of any particular world religion,

spirituality or philosophy, perhaps analogous to the focus of scientific developments over centuries as to our understanding of the sun revolving around the Earth (rather than vice versa) or of the origins of Creation which challenged the established theological assumptions of the day, thus encouraging and enabling consequential theological developments. Worldwide scholarship of transpersonal psychology is concerned with illuminating, with increased accuracy, both scientifically and experientially, our understanding of the human *psyche* and consciousness, for people of all cultures/religions/spiritualities, regardless of any theological implications for any particular religion/spirituality/philosophy. What is revealed as a perspectival understanding of the depth *psyche* is universal, independent of religious beliefs, although religious/theological beliefs can and do shape the emergent ego-level development within individual *psyches*.

6. Transpersonal: Post Jungian Developments

Wilber's ground-breaking model of the 'Spectrum of Consciousness' (Wilber 1993) represents consciousness metaphorically as a spectrum of different bands, a 'Holarchy', ranging from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit, as interconnected whole-parts, called 'holons' within 'the perennial philosophy's Great Chain of Being' (Wilber 1993, p. xvii). Wilber views consciousness as both 'Ground and Goal' (Wilber 1993, p. xvi) of the psycho-spiritual journey of life, which has similar resonance with Rahner's theological 'origin and goal' of all reality (Kilby 2007) and Myers' Christian view that 'God is the ground of all being' (Myers 2010, p. 111), echoing Eckhart's 'Grunt' (Woods 1986, p. 42). Therefore, transpersonal psychology and spirituality meet in the similar territory of a mysterious mystical landscape, each using their own frameworks of understanding to help further humanity's understanding of the individual's relation with God/Divinity from birth, through childhood to adulthood.

Jung's 'Romantic U-turn'¹¹ in the second half of life has been well critiqued by post-Jungian theorists and self-psychology theorists, such as Kohut and Kernberg, who have each developed profound transpersonal and self-psychological models of the *psyche* to explain with conceptual clarity the relationship between the development of individual ego structures in the *psyche* from birth in relation to the collective unconscious of the self, the transcendent unity of Divine Consciousness. Post-Jungian Michael Washburn's model of the *psyche* suggests that the infant *psyche* starts out in a kind of 'unconscious union/heaven' with the transpersonal depths of the *psyche*, which he termed 'The Dynamic Ground' (Washburn 1995), out of which paradisiacal state of 'Unconscious Heaven' (which state Wilber conversely argued as better termed 'Unconscious Hell'), the infant's *psyche* will develop and unconsciously long to return to during adulthood (Washburn 1995, pp. 121–31). Interestingly, this transpersonal model of the infantile stage shares theological resonance with Rahner's 'Infinite Openness to the Infinite' (Bunge 2001, pp. 406–45) of the infant. Therefore, for Washburn, infantile union with 'The Dynamic Ground' is lost in the infantile early years and the infant's developing sense of self in the ego development in the *psyche* moves into a disconnected egoic state (which Wilber and Washburn concur as 'Conscious Hell'), before what Washburn articulates as then making a 'U-turn' to 'The Dynamic Ground' of the prior infantile consciousness in adulthood in 'Conscious Heaven' (Washburn 1995, pp. 121–31).

Post-Jungian Wilber considers such Jungian–Washburn depth psychology to be a 'Romantic'¹² view of the *psyche* that commits 'the Pre/Trans Fallacy'.¹³ In short, Wilber argues that the infantile loss of 'unconscious union' with the Divine is impossible because to lose oneness with that Ground is to cease to exist (Wilber 1996b). Wilber, therefore, propounds a theory of linear ascent 'Up From Eden' (Wilber 1996b), rather than a return to Eden-like infantile consciousness which is conversely broadly articulated as a psycho-

spiritual journey from ‘Unconscious Hell’ to ‘Conscious Hell’ to ‘Conscious Heaven’. However, as a nuance, given the understanding of what is generally termed in infancy as the existence of a rudimentary ‘body-ego’ together with soul-consciousness in infancy, my own integral view might consider a conjoined paradoxical use of ‘Unconscious Heaven/Hell’ to be more complete/accurate descriptor, rather than maintaining a distinct Wilber–Washburn polemic. However, Wilber’s complex model does recognise the subtleties that individuals have different ‘waves and streams’ of psycho-spiritual development towards individuation and ultimate ‘realisation’ or ‘awakening’, as a person might be very highly developed in one area of consciousness (intellectual/academic) yet unconscious/undeveloped in another (poor depth psychological insight/self-awareness) (Wilber 2000a). Washburn’s ‘spiral’ model of development views psycho-spiritual development as a process of ‘regression in the service of transcendence and regeneration in spirit’ (Washburn 1995, p. 7) to a higher, more integrated level of consciousness. Post-Jungian Stanislav Grof suggests an integrated view that progression alternates with regression (Wilber 2000b). However, post-Jungian A.H. Almaas’ model of psycho-spiritual thought articulates the infant *psyche* as being both in contact with Divine Ground or ‘Essence’ (Almaas 1998) but without self-conscious recognition of it and that progression on the ‘inner journey home’ (Almaas 2004) in the *psyche*, therefore, involves a regression for only a part of our consciousness as ‘Essence’ as the eternal nature of the soul is outside of time, such that recognising our true self, one with God/Presence, is a conscious recognition of our inherent true nature as Essence/Presence (Almaas 1998).

In a nutshell, the much-debated transpersonal question of the ‘Pre/Trans Fallacy’ essentially attempts to express theoretically the relationship between the emerging psychology of human ego development in the mind from birth in relation to the depth, essential Ground/Spirit/Divine/Source¹⁴ of the human *psyche*, thereby taking the interdisciplinarity inherent in the academic question of the relationship between psychology and spirituality to even deeper levels of understanding and necessary ongoing inquiry and trans-/interdisciplinary scholarship. I consider that such theological–psychological–transpersonal transdisciplinarity is crucial for an increasingly complete understanding of the human *psyche* and the soul’s potential union with God/Divinity in mysticism and cannot be ignored or sidelined by any singular discipline within mysticism scholarship, which would, therefore, remain an inherently partial, non-inter-/transdisciplinary view of mysticism. As all mystics have a *psyche*, mysticism scholarship cannot ignore the various psychological schools of thought in relation to theories/models of the *psyche*. In order to understand the human *psyche* in its complete sense of a body–mind–soul–spirit (or pre-personal/personal/transpersonal/transcendental) continuum, both the disciplines of psychology and theology are essential in order to build as accurate a model of understanding of the *psyche* as possible to understand with increasing clarity how the human ego develops in the mind in relation to its underlying continuum of depth soul-consciousness, which, in the mystical life, sees through the surface reality of self-reflective ego-consciousness to its underlying pre-existing/birth depths of soul-level consciousness in the *psyche*.

Therefore, an integrative–transpersonal view of the *psyche* and the ongoing ‘Pre/Trans Fallacy’ debate sheds light on the complex areas of mysticism scholarship, notably, the relationship between mystical states/phenomena experienced through ‘method’ or ‘grace’. The transpersonal perspective of the ‘Spectrum of Consciousness’ can explain how mystical states/phenomena can arise at different levels and stages of psycho-spiritual development in different people, therefore allowing for the possibility of ‘spontaneous awakenings’ or ‘visions’ (such as those seen in many female medieval mystics, such as Hildegard and Julian) as well as those that arise following years of contemplative and meditative depth training in established spiritual/mystical traditions. In reality, there can often

be an interplay of ‘method’ and ‘grace’ in global mysticisms and so the transpersonal perspective of ‘Consciousness’ is a crucial additional post-modern perspective that is a valuable contribution to post-modern mysticism scholarship in trans-/interdisciplinarity.

In essence, post-Jungian transpersonal psychology models view the depths of the *psyche* as essentially ‘inter-spiritual’ in the sense that the experiential, ontological reality of the depths of consciousness cannot be subsumed by any one denominational theology. Wilber says, ‘Whether Reality is called Brahman, God, Tao, Dharmakaya, Void, or whatever is of no great concern, for all alike point to that state of non-dual Mind wherein the universe is not split into the seer and the seen’ (Wilber 1993, p. 67). Consciousness is inherently, experientially, non-denominational beyond all theological concepts, which we shall further examine in this paper as a thread of thought in Merton. Indeed, Alan Watts describes ‘Christ’ as ‘the realization that there is no separate “I”’ (Watts 1987, p. 131) and ‘God’ as ‘the undefinable *this*’ (Watts 1987, p. 130). However, the transpersonal model may pose a challenge to exclusivist Christians or medievalist scholars of mysticism who tend to label all psychological approaches with the broad brush of ‘perennialism’ without fully appreciating the significance of the transpersonal dimensions of the *psyche*, beyond theological conceptualising, to experiential dimensions of ontological consciousness in the mind–soul–spirit spectrum of the human *psyche* (Wilber 2000a). Transpersonal models of consciousness must not be conflated with perennialist–theological-level definitional labelling, but seen in their own scholarly light because consciousness studies are not limited or informed by theologies and therefore cannot be confined to any theological labelling; hence, transdisciplinarity is mooted as the most complete perspectival *gestalt*¹⁵ for mysticism scholarship of the future.

It is important, yet perhaps understandably hard, for theologians to realise that Jungians and post-Jungians are simply not attempting to create any religious ‘theology’ and, further, are not thinking primarily in a theological way, which conversely, theologians are used to doing. In short, theologians tend to theologise about psychological theories from their own way of thinking theologically, rather than from an informed standpoint of qualifications in psychological thinking, both professional and academic. This line of theological thinking in relation to psychologies has been the subject of much theological questioning of Jungian psychology: ‘Why should Christians read Jung? . . . His theory, some argue, is a rival religion that assumes an unfallen human nature, so mired in the morass of subjectivism that life, death, and resurrection of Christ have no objective meaning. Phillip Rieff concluded, “Better an outright enemy [Freud] than an untrustworthy friend [Jung]”’ (Ulanov and Dueck 2008, pp. 3–4).

Importantly, transpersonal theories have a different intention to ‘theological thinking’, in that the focus and function of transpersonal psychologies are interested primarily in creating various models of the *psyche* and theories of consciousness that provide useful and ever-penetrating insight into the depth *psyche* to where union with God/Divine Consciousness is possible for the soul to experience and have ensuing illumined experiential knowledge about. To illustrate this point, the use of archetypal symbols (Trinity/Unity) within psychology would be used primarily with symbolic interest at an archetypal level of human consciousness in the *psyche* and are not used within exclusively theological contextual understandings within dogmatics: not for any theological purpose in terms of aligning psychological thought with traditional Christianity’s theologies of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ as against the Non-conformity of the theological unity of dissenting Unitarian theologies or vice versa. Transpersonal models/theories and Christian theologies all shed light on the ‘absolute mystery’ (Kilby 2007, p. xviii) of God of whom/which theologian Karl Rahner considers we cannot ultimately say anything (ibid.). Trans-/interdisciplinarity in mysticism is, therefore, mooted as preventing any one discipline from dominating the

academic field of mysticism scholarship, such as subsuming psychologies under theological thinking/labelling.

An example of progressive interdisciplinary mystical–theological–psychological thinking is Richard Rohr, whose theological thinking ‘leans heavily on’ (Winner 2011, p. 39) Jung in his own exploration of the transformational journey in the first and second halves of life (Rohr 2012, 2013). Rohr sees the modern psychological word ‘ego’ (which Rohr suggests is what Jesus meant by ‘wineskin’ (Rohr 2012, p. 36) as being closer to the original intended meaning of the biblical word ‘sarx’¹⁶ which is often translated as ‘flesh’, closer to Williams’ view of the ‘flesh’ as ‘life dominated by self-directed instinct’ (Williams 1999). Rohr speaks of a return in the second half of life to a ‘second naïveté’ (which echoes John Izzo’s ‘second innocence’ (Izzo 2004)), which Rohr says that Ricoeur regarded as ‘a return to the joy of our first naïveté, but now totally new, inclusive, and mature thinking’.¹⁷ Rohrian perspective on the complex transpersonal debate on the question of the ‘Pre/Trans fallacy’ expresses transpersonal dimensional psychology in compatible Christian terms. Rohr says, ‘spirit is the whole self, the Christ self that we were born into and yet must re-discover’¹⁸ and that the journey is ‘a spiral and never a straight line’ (Rohr 2012, p. 94), which compliments Washburn’s spiral model, as distinct from Wilber’s largely linear model. Rohr’s views of ‘The Universal Christ’ (Rohr 2019b), (echoing Ilia Delio (2011), Andrew Harvey (1999), Bede Griffiths (1990, 1992, 1994)) and ‘the eternal mystery of matter and spirit as one’ (Rohr 2014, p. 210), compliment Wilber’s spectrum of consciousness (Wilber 1993), similarly referring to ‘the Great Chain of Being’ (Rohr 2019b, p. 57) of medieval theologians. Rohr says that the ‘Universal Christ’ is a word for ‘the *transcendent within* of everything in the universe’ (Rohr 2019b, pp. 5–21) and, further, echoes McFague in saying ‘The body of God, shaped by the Christic paradigm, is also the Cosmic Christ’ (McFague 1993, p. 179, as cited in Rohr 2019a). Rohr presents a contemporary model of Christian Spirituality which is very in tune with post-Jungian psycho-spiritual models of the psyche—of the ‘Universal Christ’ which is ‘larger than any one . . . religion’, such that its ‘radical inclusivity is a threat to any power structure and any form of arrogant thinking’ (Rohr 2019b, p. 35).

However, integrating/considering transpersonal psychology and its inter-spiritual universal understandings of consciousness (Kelley 2021) into Christian Spirituality and mysticism may be challenging to some because it presents a model of the depth psyche, one with Divine Consciousness, howsoever Divinity is named across different faith traditions. However, for progressive Christians like Rohr, ‘*No one religion will ever encompass the depth of such faith*’ (Rohr 2019b, p. 22). Rohr’s theological views are, therefore, resonant with the Wilberian transpersonal view that consciousness itself is ontologically non-denominational in the sense that it transcends-yet-includes all the conceptual divisions of faith in ontological reality. As Wilber says, consciousness just ‘is’ and, ‘to *know* Reality is to *be* Reality’ (Wilber 1993, p. 67). Indeed, Karl Rahner considers theologically that we cannot distinguish knowing from ‘infinite Being’ (Kilby 2007, p. 2). Thus, from a post-Jungian (and specifically Wilberian) view, the developing understanding of human consciousness in relation to the Divine can be enhanced both by transpersonal psychology and theology through the different perspectives of all faiths without being dominated by any one doctrinal view (Wilber 2017), which is inherently partial in its theological remit. We will see that Merton’s progressive interreligious thinking has resonance with post-modern transpersonal psychologies, shared in relation to action and contemplation.

Developments in transpersonal psychology, therefore, challenge Ulanov’s position on Jungian psychology that depth psychology’s ‘ministry has been achieved if it unshackles us, opens us to the housing of the ego . . . It is only religion, theology, the churches’ life that dares to . . . brave the unknown waters . . . into the unknown’ (Ulanov 2000, pp. 18–19). It is my experience as a transpersonal psychotherapist that spirituality’s transper-

sonal/transcendent ‘unknown’ is the very territory of transpersonal psychotherapy, in journeying alongside another experientially in plumbing the ‘unknown’, unconscious depths of the soul-mind/*psyche* in relation to Spirit/God/Divine, howsoever this ‘unknown’ is ‘named/conceptualized’ in world faiths: Brahman/Allah/Dharmakaya/Tao/Being/God. Indeed, psychotherapists have already been considered as ‘the secular priesthood of our time’ (Vaughan n.d.) in their function of assisting in the transformation of the soul/*psyche*.

Post-Jungian Almaas uses the concept of ‘Essence/Presence’ or ‘True Nature’ (Almaas 1998) to describe ‘the fundamental nature of what we are’ (Almaas 2017, p. 1), synonymous with ‘Spirit’ (Almaas 2017, pp. 1–25) which can only ever be experiential, (not conceptually only) realising the following: ‘the experiential recognition of spirit as spirit—experientially knowing that spirit is and knowing spirit in its purity’ (Almaas 2017, p. 1). For Almaas, the realisation of ‘True Nature’ is a process of ‘realization and development of ... the individual consciousness, ... equated with the Western notion of soul’ (Almaas 2017, p. 2). Almaas recognises that ‘all such expressions of soul, spirit and True Nature can become ‘problematic’ and involve ‘playing with words’ because recognising our True Nature experientially ‘means directly seeing that it is not constructed’ (Almaas 2017, p. 10). Almaas emphasises that true nature is not a ‘construction of the mind. It is not an emotion or reaction of the heart. It is not a sensation of the body’ (Almaas 2017, p. 22). It is a ‘direct experiential non-conceptual unmediated realisation. It is not imagination ... not a construction ... or theory’ (Almaas 2017, p. 24). Conceptualisation is inherent in the tools of all languages which leads to the inevitable outcome of the ‘objectification and reification’ (Almaas 2017, p. 88) of spiritual dimensions which can only be realised through direct experience (Almaas 2017, p. v). The transpersonal ‘unity consciousness’ beyond the conceptualisation and reification of opposite-concepts in the ‘spectrum of consciousness’ of the depth *psyche* is portrayed, in art–theological analogy, by *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, now considered in relation to ‘action and contemplation’ in mystical theologies.

7. A Transpersonal Perspective on ‘Action and Contemplation’

Almaas’ articulation of the ‘direct experiential non-conceptual unmediated realisation’ of our ‘True Nature’ or ‘Spirit’ in the depths of the human *psyche*, as a mind–soul–spirit continuum, in accord with the Wilberian ‘Spectrum of Consciousness’, is at the heart of this paper’s view of the perennially contested question of action and contemplation in mysticism. I have briefly summarised the profundity of the transpersonal perspective on the human *psyche*, in particular, elucidating transpersonal psychologies’ various articulations of the relationship between the levels of self-reflective egoic consciousness out of or in relation to the transcendental/transpersonal depths of the *psyche*, namely, the ‘ego’ variously in relation to Washburn’s ‘Dynamic Ground’, or Almaas’ ‘Essence’ or Wilber’s ‘Up from Eden’. I will now weave in the transpersonal psychological thread of understanding of mystical-depth ‘consciousness’ in the *psyche* through an interreligious field of comparative religious approaches to action, contemplation and non-action. I will draw on the mystical thinkers of three world religious mystical traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and mystical Islam/Sufism: Thích Nhất Hạnh, Swami Sivananda and Hazrat Inayat Khan, respectively, in relation to the progressive mystical thought of Thomas Merton, drawing on his lesser examined work ‘Inner Experience’, mooted as compatible with some post-modern post-Jungian transpersonal psychologies in transdisciplinarity (Merton 2003).

In presenting *the Sleeping Hermaphrodite* as an art–theological metaphor for the depth transpersonal perspective of ‘unity consciousness’ (Wilber 2000a) in the union of action and contemplation in mysticism, it does not seek to ‘set in stone’ the perennially contested oscillation between the apparent theological poles between contemplation and action, but rather to exemplify a depth perspective elucidated by transpersonal psychology. Transpersonal

psychologies posit a view of the union of action and contemplation as a Jungian/post-Jungian ‘union of opposites’ (Jung 1953), or ‘action in inaction’,¹⁹ to coin the interreligious term of Hinduism’s *Bhagavad Gita* as well as Buddhism’s mindfulness and Sufism’s ‘Social Gathekas’ (Khan 2020) in transdisciplinary integral thinking: ‘At the deepest level of selfhood, what [Merton] later came to call the “transcendent Self”, there is no real distinction between contemplation and action’ (King 2001, p. 63). Therefore, *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite* is analogous to such ‘deepest level of selfhood’ or ‘transcendent Self’ that is revealed in both mystical theologies and transpersonal psychologies: the union of action and contemplation.

8. Buddhism, Thich Nhât Hanh and Merton

Mystical unitive consciousness is first explored within the context of ‘Engaged Buddhism’, as coined by the late Thich Nhât Hanh, for whom there was ‘no contradiction between practising mindfulness and engaging in social action. You do not cease practising mindfulness to engage in social action; you extend your contemplative practice to include it’ (King 2001, p. 151). Specifically, mindfulness entails ‘keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality’, facilitated by ‘conscious breathing’ such that any action or social action is best served when ‘performed with full awareness’ (King 2001, p. 88) or in full awake consciousness. With ‘language remarkably similar to what one finds in Merton’s writings at this time’, Nhât Hanh refers to feeling ‘caught between two opposing selves—the ‘false self’ imposed by society and . . . ‘true self’ (King 2001, p. 77). Similar references can be found in Merton’s study of Zen Buddhism with D. T. Suzuki, in which Suzuki explained of Zen Zazen meditation that a person’s awareness becomes centred not in the ‘small self’ but in the ‘large self’, which Buddhists call ‘Buddha Nature’: ‘the ultimate emptiness or poverty of the self’ (King 2001, p. 108). Merton speaks of the inner self as ‘our true self’ (Merton 2003, p. 11), where one discovers the secret of one’s depth spiritual identity in God, as ‘one with’ God: ‘The inner self is as secret as God and, like Him, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession’ (Merton 2003, p. 7). The echoes of transpersonal psychologies of the ‘true self’²⁰ become clear, as ‘direct experiential non-conceptual unmediated realisation. It is not imagination . . . not a construction . . . or theory’ (Almaas 2017, p. 24). Transdisciplinary similarities within post-modern understandings of transpersonal psychologies on the essential nature of the ‘true self’ or ‘true nature’ (Almaas 2004, pp. 247–67) as Divine Consciousness in the transpersonal/transcendental dimensions of the source/depths of ‘the Great Chain of Being’ (Rohr 2019b, p. 57) are considered as the depth dimension of the human psyche of ‘I AM’ consciousness/being. Ultimately, for Merton, who said he would probably ‘die of spiritual asphyxiation’ if he could not ‘breathe Zen’,²¹ action and contemplation are ‘intrinsically related’ (King 2001, p. 62): ‘Contemplation, if it is genuine, must express itself in action on behalf of others, while social action unaccompanied by contemplation invariably grows sterile and unproductive. Contemplation *and* action are required for a fully integrated spirituality’ (King 2001, p. 6).

Interestingly, Merton concluded that the Trappist monastic norm of ‘active contemplation’ produced ‘very few “pure contemplatives”’ as they ‘were much *too active* for that’ and so the Trappist norm was ‘not Merton’s idea of contemplation’ (King 2001, p. 13). From a transpersonal perspective, this observation is suggestive of Trappists not really being true contemplatives at the level of realisation of the true self, ‘one with God’, but introverted at the level of the ‘false self’ or ‘ego-consciousness’. Instead, the level of contemplation that Merton sought was a contemplative–solitudinous union with God, commensurate with the level of unity consciousness in transpersonal models of the *psyche*. Ultimately for Merton, ‘contemplation is our awakening to this mysterious and elusive self, this unknown ‘I’ beyond observation and reflection’, in which the unitive state of consciousness, action and contemplation are ‘intrinsically related’ (King 2001, p. 62): ‘Far from being essentially

opposed to each other, interior contemplation and external activity are two aspects of the same love of God' and further, 'the activity of the contemplative . . . must be born of contemplation and must resemble it' (Merton 1972, pp. 39–40, as cited in King 2001, p. 62). Merton's views bear uncanny similarities to Buddhist mindfulness whilst engaging in activities, such that 'For Merton, contemplation and the act of solitude is an action because it expresses love and points towards the source of love: God' (Aguilar 2011, p. 72). We are reminded of Merton's views that are so resonant with post-modern post-Jungian psychologies that 'At the deepest level of selfhood, what he later came to call the "transcendent Self", there is no real distinction between contemplation and action' (King 2001, p. 63). Therefore, the 'hermaphroditic union' of *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite* represents this level of unity consciousness in the depth *psyche* at the level of the transcendent self. Engaged Buddhism, as an exemplar of this depth union of action and contemplation, has been extended to more generally accepted vernacular ideas of 'Engaged Spirituality' or 'Engaged Christianity' and 'Engaged Contemplation', thus making more popular and accessible the practical reality of the expressed union of action and contemplation in the activities of the self-realised contemplative mystic.

9. Hinduism's Bhagavad Gita and Merton

The theme of mystical unitive consciousness represented by *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite* is explored as interwoven through Hindu thought, with elucidation from Merton's commentaries on Hinduism's *Bhagavad Gita*. In Hinduism, this depth dimensional theme is discovered to have been long present in the allegory-image of the 'Chariot' that represents the full spectrum of human consciousness as understood in the Hindu tradition: from the five senses of the physical body to the Superconscious soul of 'I AM' consciousness driving the chariot. The imagery of the chariot to represent the full spectrum of consciousness of a human being will be examined more closely to elucidate its resonance with transpersonal psychologies and therefore act as a bridge for understanding further the union of action and contemplation in contemplative depth mysticism in transdisciplinarity.

Hinduism's *Bhagavad Gita* (400–200 BCE) perhaps contains some of the oldest scripture relating to the age-old dilemma of the call to action in the soul's relation to God. As Merton wrote, the *Bhagavad Gita* 'can be seen as the great treatise on the "Active Life"'. However, Merton adds that the *Gita* 'is really something more, for it tends to fuse worship, action, and contemplation in a fulfilment of daily duty which transcends all three by virtue of a higher consciousness: a consciousness of acting passively, being an obedient instrument of a transcendent will' (Merton 2021, p. 316).

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna is called to fight in a battle but does not want to fight. Krishna, as an incarnation of God (Vishnu), reminds Arjuna (Soul) of his duty to fight as a Warrior and encourages him to fight. Obviously, this story is not an easy or palatable one to hear in this day and age and Merton acknowledges that the *Gita* presents a problem in a post-modern context as it appears to justify war. Merton acknowledges that Krishna's call for Arjuna to fight illicit comparable interreligious analogies of wars: 'we are uneasily reminded of the fact that in Hinduism as well as in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, there is a concept of a "holy war" which is "willed by God"', such as medieval Christian Crusades or a literal jihad of fundamentalist Islam. However, Merton, like Mahatma Gandhi,²² recognised that the *Bhagavad Gita* is 'not a justification of war' (Merton 2021, p. 318) and like all good mystical texts, like the Greek *Iliad*, has a hidden, gnostic, allegorical level of meaning of Arjuna's union with God or 'Krishna consciousness'—that of the duty (dharma) of the inner spiritual battle, or we might say, interreligiously and analogously, the mystical inner-pilgrimages to find the 'holy grail' or the 'inner haj' or 'interior spiritual jihad' to the soul's interior 'Kaa'ba' of the heart.

So, the interior dimension of God-Consciousness, which unites contemplative union with ensuing action, is at the heart of the *Bhagavad Gita*. To elucidate the imagery of the chariot, the fully occupied chariot represents the full spectrum of possible human consciousness, which is not dissimilar to the Wilberian ‘Spectrum of Consciousness’. The outer chariot represents the container of the physical body which is pulled by the five horses representing the five senses of taste, sight, hearing, smell and touch. The reins represent the mind that the charioteer uses to drive his chariot/vehicle. The driver/charioteer represents the human intelligence of the Divine Super-Soul (Krishna) while the passenger behind Krishna symbolises a person’s soul (Arjuna). Therefore, the driving force of God-/Krishna-Consciousness represents our true identity or highest transcendental ‘I AM’ consciousness that is the real driver of the body–mind vehicle symbolised by the chariot. Put another way, Arjuna, representing the human soul, is actually a passenger in the chariot, which is ultimately driven by Krishna, representing Divine ‘I AM’ consciousness. In Hinduism, Krishna represents the ‘conditioned form’ of the Godhead, Brahman: ‘Unconditioned brahman is pure Consciousness, Pure Act—but not activity’. Therefore, in this analogy of the chariot, as consciousness, we see how the union of action and contemplation in a natural way of ‘action in inaction’ emanates from the consciousness of the divinely realised soul, the mystic who has attained union with God. It is in the famous words of the *Gita*, where the union of action and inaction is expressed in relation to the soul’s true Identity in God, as Krishna famously says the following: ‘One who sees inaction in action, and action in inaction, is intelligent among men, and he is in the transcendental position, although engaged in all sorts of activities’.²³ Swami Sivananda gives an interpretation of this famous discourse in explaining that ‘In common parlance *action* means ‘movement of the body. . . and *inaction* means ‘to sit quiet’. However, Sivananda explains that the problem is ‘the idea of agency, the idea *I am the doer*’ and that ‘if you identify yourself with the actionless Self, no matter what work or how much of it is done, action is no action at all. This is inaction in action’. Sivananda further explains that ‘The Self is actionless (*Akarta* or non-doer, *Nishkriya* or without work). The body and the senses perform the action. The actions of the body and the senses are falsely and wrongly attributed by the ignorant to the actionless self. Therefore, the ignorant man thinks, ‘*I act*’ (Sivananda 2013, pp. 88–89). Thomas Merton similarly understood the deeper meaning of what is referred to as ‘Action in Inaction’ in saying that it is ‘in surrendering a false and illusory liberty on the superficial level that man unites himself with the inner ground of reality and freedom in himself which is the will of God, of Krishna, of Providence, of Tao’. Merton acknowledges that these ‘concepts do not all exactly coincide, but they have much in common’ (Merton 2021, p. 320). Merton concluded that ‘The Gita, like the Gospels, teaches us to live in an awareness of an inner truth that exceeds the grasp of our thought and cannot be subject to our own control’. Merton intuited that ‘There is always a possibility that what an Eastern mystic describes as Self is what the Western mystic will describe as God, because we shall see presently that the mystical union between the soul and God renders them in some sense “undivided” (though metaphysically distinct) in spiritual experience’ (Merton 2003, p. 13). Indeed, Merton speaks specifically of ‘Christian self-realization’ (Merton 2003, p. 22), in saying that ‘if we enter into ourselves, find our true self, and then pass “beyond” the inner “I”, we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the “I AM” of the Almighty’ (Merton 2003, p. 11). Here, we are reminded of Merton’s ‘The New Consciousness’ (Merton 1968, pp. 15–32) in which he writes of ‘a form of ‘*pure consciousness*, in which the subject as such “disappears”’ (Merton 1968, p. 24). Recalling Merton’s thoughts on the union of action and contemplation, he articulated that ‘At the deepest level of selfhood, what he later came to call the “transcendent Self”, there is no real distinction between contemplation and action’ (King 2001, p. 63) and further that ‘the activity of the contemplative . . . must

be born of contemplation and must resemble it' (Merton 1972, pp. 39–40). As an art-theological analogy for the union of action and contemplation, I suggest that *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite* analogously 'resembles' the inaction-activity of the contemplative that is born of contemplative-depth mystical union: in the 'transcendent Self', where there is 'no real distinction between contemplation and action', as symbolised by the hermaphroditic 'union of opposites', such as 'male and female' born of God/Krishna/Unity-Consciousness or of the comparable 'yin and yang' of the Tao.

10. Sufi Mysticism, Hazrat Inayat Khan²⁴ and Merton

Finally, this paper will engage with the dimension of Islamic mysticism, known as Sufism²⁵ and its commitment to 'social gathekas' (Khan 2020): the harmony of outward action and the inner life of divine transformation to one's true essential nature, one with God/Divine Consciousness. For the Sufi mystic, all action flows out of the 'station' (*maqam*) of Divine Illumination, the true psycho-spiritual transformation of the Sufi who is 'In the World but not of it'.²⁶ In this sense, Sufism's 'social gathekas' embodies Merton's aforesaid sentiment that 'the activity of the contemplative . . . must be born of contemplation and must resemble it' (Merton 1972, pp. 9–40). In Sufism, (which profoundly influenced Merton, who taught Sufism to a profound level to his novitiates at the Abbey of Gethsemane) (Baker and Henry 2005), we similarly discover an articulation of Merton's depth insight that 'At the deepest level of selfhood. . .the "transcendent Self", there is no real distinction between contemplation and action' (King 2001, p. 63) How is this insight similarly arrived at and subsequently articulated within a Sufi mystical context?

Sufism's understanding of the soul is particularly resonant with the post-modern post-Jungian depth insights of the consciousness and/or intelligence of the human *psyche* and therefore, a good final exemplar for the purpose of this paper in illustrating the depth union of action and contemplation which is found in mystics who have reached a level/station/*maqam* of mystical unity consciousness or union of the soul with God, where the actions of the mystic are a harmonious outflowing of the soul's conscious union with God/Divine Being. Sufism's depth insight is often summarised by the following *Hadith*: 'Man 'arafa nafsahu faqad 'arafa rabbahu', meaning, 'He who knows himself knows the Lord' (Baker and Henry 2005, p. 22). Sufism, akin to many of the depth insights of transpersonal psychotherapeutic psycho-spiritual transformation, is an experientially based mystical wisdom that understands the human *psyche* to be a spectrum of consciousness/intelligence of the soul, one with God/Divine Being in its depths. As such, Islamic *ma'rifah* is a term which refers to this experiential mystical insight, 'which means simply "knowledge" or "recognition" . . . a special, deeper knowledge of things that can only be achieved by personal transformation' (ibid.). Specifically, '*ma'rifah* demands knowing one's innermost self, and this self-knowledge is the prerequisite for knowing God . . . [yet] *ma'rifah* cannot be found in books' (ibid.), but is 'the direct knowledge of self and God that flows freely in the purified heart' (Baker and Henry 2005, p. 23), following the transformational spiritual stages of '*fanâ* and *baqâ*, or "annihilation" and "subsistence"' (Baker and Henry 2005, p. 27).

W. H. S. Gebel explains that the twelfth-century Sufi mystic Shahabuddin Suhrawardi 'concluded that the essence of knowledge is self-revealing. There is a knowledge that is direct, immediate, and spontaneous. It is independent of analysis. The Sufis call it presential knowledge because it comes from a keen awareness of presence' (Gebel 2018, p. 15). Similarly, for Rohr, in Christian mysticism, 'the word "mysticism" simply means experiential knowledge of spiritual things, as opposed to book knowledge, second hand knowledge, or even church knowledge' (Rohr 2019b, p. 1).

From the transpersonal perspective, the Sufi process of transformation through the ecstatic mysticism of *fanâ* and *baqâ* is complimentary to the transpersonal perspective of the

psyche and particularly potent to the 'Pre/Trans Fallacy' debate, when seen as a 'Spectrum of Consciousness', as the self-reflective ego level of identity is 'seen/passed through' and transcended to what is 'beyond the personal' (transpersonal). Khan says,

Very often people are afraid of reading in Buddhist books where the interpretation of nirvana is annihilation. No one wants to be annihilated, and people are very much afraid when they read "annihilation". It is only a matter of the word—the same in Sanskrit is a beautiful word. The same is the word *fana'* of the Sufis. Translated in English it is "annihilation", but when we understand, it is "going through"; it really means "to go through." And to Pass through what? Through the false conception, which is necessary first, and to arrive at the true realization. (Khan 2017, p. 295)

Khan speaks of the 'annihilation' or 'death' of the ego (or ego level of identity) in terms of it being better expressed in words such as a 'passing/going through' of the false ego self-reflective self in the *psyche* to realising the 'true divine self', one with Divinity, the subsistence of the soul with God. This, in turn, compliments Merton's level of understanding of 'pure consciousness', at which level of realisation/integration, action and contemplation are united in unity consciousness, which is beyond duality. Importantly, this is not psychologically the same as preconsciousness or unconsciousness. Therefore, the transpersonal perspective offers a new perspectival lens of unity consciousness through which to view mysticism's action and contemplation in line with Merton's 'pure consciousness'. This subtle shift in transpersonal perspective from duality (of ego consciousness) to 'unity consciousness' is not to be confused with 'explaining' or 'reducing' mystical ecstatic union to the level of the union of action and contemplation *per se* in the traditional ways of thinking about action and contemplation in the current mysticism scholarship. Instead, it is articulating a union of action and contemplation with respect to the realised level of 'pure consciousness', which is a given clarity of understanding from the transpersonal perspective, namely, the transpersonal/transcendental dimension of 'unity consciousness' in the 'Spectrum of Consciousness' in the *psyche*.

Sufism's experiential path of mystical transformation can be further illumined by Inayat Khan's understanding of the word 'soul' (*psyche*) as a 'condition of intelligence': 'Intelligence, in its original aspect, is the essence of life, the spirit of God. But when this intelligence is caught in an accommodation such as the body and mind, its predisposition of knowing—it's original nature—then knows; and that knowing soul becomes consciousness' (Khan 2016, p. 293). God is metaphorically likened to the Sun and souls as 'rays of this sun' (Khan 2016, p. 132). Inayat Khan says that Sufi 'mystics contemplate upon the Being of God and so raise their consciousness above the limitations of time and space, so liberating their soul by lifting it to the divine spheres' (Khan 2016, p. 134), as a ray of the Sun can raise to be reunited with its Sun-source of unity consciousness or intelligence. Sufi mystical understanding is resonant with what post-modern post-Jungian transpersonal psychology charts as the 'Spectrum of Consciousness' in the human *psyche* from pre-personal to personal to transpersonal and transcendental levels. Merton was influenced by Massignon, with whom he corresponded, and Massignon was, in turn, influenced by al-Hallāj. Massignon writes that 'Hallājīan psychology...allows man the guiding rule and basic unity of an immaterial principle: *qalb*, heart, or *ruh*, spirit'. He 'declares mystical union to be real; far from being the total disappearance of the heart... it is its sanctifying resurrection'. He explains that the 'final covering of the heart...is the *sirr*, the latent personality, the implicit consciousness, the deep subconscious, the secret cell walled up [and hidden] to every creature, the "involute virgin"'.²⁷ For 'al-Hallāj and for Massignon, "the virgin" is the innermost, secret heart (*as-sirr*)- the deep subconscious of a

person'.²⁸ Merton sums up this transpersonal depth understanding of a person's *psyche* revealed in Sufi mysticism beautifully:

Sufism looks at man as a heart and a spirit and a secret, and the secret is the deepest part. The secret of man is God's secret; therefore, it is in God. My secret is God's innermost knowledge of me, which He alone possesses. It is God's secret knowledge of myself in Him . . . This is a very important concept in the contemplative life, both in Sufism and in the Christian tradition: To develop a heart that knows God, not just as a heart that loves God, but a heart that knows God.²⁹

Merton 'thirsted for the kind of structured mystical life which the Sufi path offered in which the active and passive modes of the mystical life could be balanced on the basis of a reality that transcended the accidentality of individual existence'.³⁰ Sufism's mystical unity, therefore, not only acknowledges the union of action and contemplation that is possible in the depths of the unitive consciousness of the mystic but embodies a path to the union that honours both the 'active and passive modes of the mystical life'. Such a path is embodied in the wisdom teachings of the 'social gathekas' (Khan 2020).

In Sufi mysticism, like Hinduism's *Bhagavad Gita*, the 'greatest war, or the *jihād al-akhbâr*, [is] the holy war against yourself, which is a lifelong battle'³¹ to self-knowledge, identity and union with God. Burton Thurston writes of Merton's correspondence with Abdul Aziz 'on the subject of prayer and contemplation'³² and that Merton had 'begun to work on the similarities between the Sufis and the Oriental Christian mystics'.³³ Merton saw the similarities of Sufi *zikr/dhikr* and Eastern Orthodox Christianity's *hesychastic* prayer, the 'Jesus Prayer',³⁴ in which 'the culmination of the prayerful experience is the vision of Divine . . . Light which is thought to be identical with the Uncreated Light seen at Jesus' Transfiguration'.³⁵ Merton wrote, 'Contemplative prayer is the recognition that we are the Sons of God, an experience of Who He is, and of His love for us, flowing from the operation of that love in us . . . it is He who is praying in us with a love too deep and too secret for us to comprehend'.³⁶ Merton taught that *zikr* was connected with the Islamic Sufi *Shahâddah*, *Lâ ilâha illa 'Llâh'*,³⁷ meaning that 'there is no God except God'.³⁸ So, the Sufi practice of *zikr* serves as a continual 'remembrance' of God in the interior experiential knowing of God as our True Essential Self in and as and of God (Merton 2003). Indeed, Merton declared in a retreat for contemplative women, 'I'm deeply impregnated with Sufism' (Merton 1992, p. 266); such imagery of male impregnation is similarly compatible with hermaphroditic metaphor.

Merton writes that 'our being somehow communicates directly with the Being of God, Who is "in us." If we enter into ourselves, find our true self, and then pass "beyond" the inner "I", we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the "I AM" of the Almighty' (Merton 2003, p. 11). The realisation of the 'I AM' level of consciousness or presence is referred to as a station/*maqam* of 'solitude'. However, Sufism speaks of 'Solitude in Company', the station of having remembered one's Divine Nature and awareness of one's identity as God's hidden treasure that was longing to be found in us. Action that flows out of that station of Divine Illumination is the true transformation, such that Sufism's commitment to 'social gathekas' expresses the harmony of outward action and the inner life of transformation as a natural extension of the lived realisation of one's true essential nature one with God/Divine Consciousness. Inayat Khan exemplifies such mystical harmony by saying, 'My smallest work in the inner plane is worth more than all I do in the outer world' (Khan 2005, p. 111).

11. Conclusions

In the first half of this paper, the post-Jungian transpersonal psychological understandings of the depths of the human *psyche* were outlined in depth, including the profound expo-

sition of the relationship between the development in childhood of the more surface level of egoic consciousness/self-identity and the ‘Dynamic Ground’ of the *psyche*, which has theological resonance with Rahner’s ‘Infinite Openness to the Infinite’ (Bunge 2001, pp. 406–45) of the infant. The transpersonal perspective was then applied to interreligious mystical theology in a spirit of transdisciplinarity, as to how Merton’s own depth-contemplative, interreligious mystical theological thinking was ahead of its time in recognising similarities (if not syncretistic exactitudes) in the contemplative–mystical depths of Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufism, as represented by Nhât Hanh, Sivananda and Inayat Khan, respectively. A similar (if not identical) thread of teachings about an experiential depth contemplative union, possible in the human *psyche*, expressed variously as reached through the practices of mindfulness, meditation, contemplation and *zikr* was presented.

Such interreligious mystical teachings profoundly influenced Merton’s own thoughts about contemplation in relation to action, such that, ‘For Merton, contemplation and the act of solitude is an action because it expresses love and points towards the source of love: God’ (Aguilar 2011, p. 72). Merton’s insights are resonant with the post-Jungian insights of the depth *psyche*, which provide a useful model for mapping the depth layers of the human *psyche*, showing how ‘unitive consciousness’ is experientially possible for the mystic who can plumb those depths. Merton says, ‘Our awareness of our inner self can at least be the fruit of a purely natural and psychological purification. Our awareness of God is a supernatural participation in the light by which He reveals Himself interiorly as dwelling in our inmost self’ (Merton 2003, p. 12). In the mystical state of unitive consciousness, action and contemplation become ‘at one’ with each other, as actions flow from a mystical–contemplative unitive consciousness of the ‘I AM’ consciousness of Divine Being, in the depths of the human *psyche*, in the heart of everyone: the ‘action in inaction’ of the *Bhagavad Gita*.³⁹

Post-Jungian Almaas calls such depth unitive consciousness, a self-realisation of ‘The Point of Existence’ (Almaas 2000), which has resonance with Massignon’s *le point vierge*. Griffiths reminds us that ‘for al-Hallâj and for Massignon, “the virgin” is the innermost, secret heart (*as-sirr*)-the deep subconscious of a person’.⁴⁰ More specifically, if the innermost heart is ‘the virgin’, the other term in the phrase we are investigating, ‘the point’ puts one in mind of ‘the primordial point’ (*an-nuqtah al-asliyyah*) of which al-Hallâj and other Muslim mystics often speak. It is the apophatic point of the mystic’s deep knowledge of God. So the ‘virgin point’, *le point vierge*, in Massignon’s parlance is by analogy the last, irreducible, secret centre of the heart.⁴¹

The Sleeping Hermaphrodite represents, in art–theological analogy, the inner repose of depth unitive consciousness of the ‘virgin point’ of depth unitive ‘I AM’ consciousness: the ‘virgin’ that is ‘male-virgin’ and ‘female-virgin’, yet neither, both or only male-virgin or female-virgin in ‘virginal/pure unity’. The mystical level realisation of virginal/pure unity consciousness has plumbed the deepest depths of the *psyche* to unitive consciousness, beyond the duality of opposites, such as male and female. *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite* serves as a sculptural–mystical analogy for an illumined soul, ‘one with God’, in whose awakened consciousness through depth contemplation, action occurs as a simultaneous expression of contemplatively realised unity consciousness. *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite* shares ‘uncanny’ (Tiaynen-Qadir and Qadir 2023, pp. 51–77) resonance with the famous painting of the female-breasted Christ at Hospices Lessines in Belgium: ‘to unveil him as the nourisher, and thereby draw attention to ourselves as being nourished by more than literal food’ (Tiaynen-Qadir and Qadir 2023, p. 56). Similarly, Campbell’s hero’s journey denotes the ‘stage of “Apotheosis”, when the enlightened hero transgresses gender duality, admitting to the vision of God that is beyond gender, and discovering that the psychic and symbolic architecture of the self is both male and female’ (Tiaynen-Qadir and Qadir 2023, p. 33). Thus,

The Sleeping Hermaphrodite as an art–theological analogy, compliments the post-modern, post-Jungian informed interdisciplinary ‘theory of “deep culture”’ (Tiaynen-Qadir and Qadir 2023, p. 5). Further, to Hillman’s view that ‘if the usual ego-centered consciousness tends to divide and make hierarchies, the “imaginal consciousness [of the complete self] is hermaphroditic, uniting masculine and feminine [symbolic] polarities”’ (Hillman 1975, as cited in Tiaynen-Qadir and Qadir 2023, p. 81), *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite* is an apt extended metaphor for the union of action and contemplation in contemplative depth mystical union in the *psyche*.

As the *psyche* is a ‘Spectrum of Consciousness’, *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite* sculptural image can, of course, be viewed through many different levels and lenses: either through ‘unitive consciousness’ or through an individual’s ‘ego-level’ self-reflective consciousness, which is progressing psycho-spiritually in potential. Therefore, it is natural that for most people, the union of action and contemplation (specifically in terms of Merton’s understanding of ‘pure consciousness’) is indeed ‘dormant’. However, the union of action and contemplation that Merton is articulating is a union at the level of what he calls ‘pure consciousness’ in the *psyche*, a level where active and contemplative potentialities are no longer ‘dormant’, but ‘actualised/realised’. In this ‘higher/integrated/realised’ sense, therefore, *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite* imagery sculpturally represents this level of union of actualised/realised potentialities, akin to the Jungian ‘conjunctio/marriage’ of the union of opposites (male/female, yin/yang, action/contemplation) and in a similar way that the Buddhist sculptural ‘Reclining Buddhas’ represent the pure awakened consciousness of the *Buddha*, which means, ‘Awakened One’. Similarly, we can see such ‘sleeping imagery’ for our awakened/transcendent consciousness in the Dionysian tradition of Neo-Platonic Christianity in that Pseudo-Dionysius says, ‘The sleep of God refers to the divine transcendence’ (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, p. 288).

To reiterate, *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, as an art–theological analogy, in no way seeks to ‘set in stone’ a hermaphroditic solution that ends all theological oscillations in relation to the fluid dynamic between action and contemplation. Indeed, the very notion of being able to ‘set in stone’ a depth mystical understanding counters the very paradoxical nature at the apophatic heart of mysticism. However, if *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite* has caught the attention of any mystical scholars, for whom the transpersonal perspective of mysticism was previously an enigma, the analogy has performed a valuable service for transdisciplinarity in mysticism. Integrating the transpersonal dimensional understanding into mysticism scholarship is an exciting and burgeoning area and one which Merton would have relished had he had access to the post-modern transpersonal models of consciousness. This paper has raised a profound meditation on the question of action and contemplation in relation to the inter-/transdisciplinarity of mysticism, acknowledging the burgeoning academic studies into transpersonal levels of unity consciousness at the sleeping/unconscious virginal depth of the *psyche*. With some final words from Merton, which echo Suhrawardi’s ‘self-revealing’ (Gebel 2018, p. 15) knowledge: ‘This is the heart of theology: not solving the contradiction, but remaining in the midst of it, in peace, knowing that it is fully solved, but that the solution is secret, and will never be guessed until it is revealed’ (Merton 1966, p. 212).

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Notes

- ¹ The Sleeping Hermaphrodite/Hermaphroditus is a Second Century Roman copy of a Hellenistic original in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy. Permission to use the author's photograph for this paper was confirmed by the Uffizi Gallery.
- ² The Greek word *psyche* translates variously as mind, soul, life, spirit, breath, iridescent and even butterfly or wafting vapour. See, Tyler (2016), pp. 4, 30.
- ³ This thesis recognises that a transdisciplinary approach, which surpasses interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary boundaries and/or approaches, is most applicable to this thesis. However, both terms 'trans-/interdisciplinary' are used, broadly, interchangeably and inclusively, for ease of reference of the reader, as the phrase interdisciplinary is often more recognisable. See, Bernstein (2015).
- ⁴ The Alef Trust, accredited by Liverpool John Moores University.
- ⁵ The Greek word *psyche* translates variously as mind, soul, life, spirit, breath, iridescent and even butterfly. See Tyler (2016), p. 4.
- ⁶ Christian Spirituality as an academic discipline is a distinct trans-/interdisciplinary academic discipline in its own right (including, but not limited to interdisciplinary subjects of psychology, history, psychotherapy, sociology, anthropology, interfaith, interreligious theologies) to the traditional, narrower, academic discipline of Christian Theology only.
- ⁷ The translation of *psyche* depends on where one sits professionally/academically in the integrative spectrum of psychological/psychotherapeutic schools of thought.
- ⁸ The nature of 'Self' is debated and defined differently across the integrative spectrum of psychological/psychotherapeutic schools of thought but is beyond the scope of this thesis. An interesting discussion of an Integral theory of the various layers of the self can be found in (Wilber 2000a, pp. 89–114).
- ⁹ C.G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, para. 399, as cited in Ulanov and Dueck (2008), p. 20.
- ¹⁰ These terms have different nuances but this is beyond the scope of this thesis, which uses these terms broadly to point to a depth of 'inter-spiritual' universal ecumenism. See, Fox (2000).
- ¹¹ A succinct summary of Wilber's critique of Jung's Romantic U-turn can be found in the 'Foreward to the New Edition' of Wilber (1996a), pp. ix–xv.
- ¹² Interestingly, Wilber's first theory concurred with Jung and Washburn's view, which he later termed his 'Wilber 1' theory to distinguish it from later theoretical developments.
- ¹³ A succinct introduction to the 'Pre/Trans fallacy' can be found in Rowan (1999), pp. 7–8.
- ¹⁴ In transpersonal psychology, these terms would be considered as synonymous.
- ¹⁵ A *gestalt* means something such as a structure or experience that, when considered as a whole, has qualities that are more than the total of all its parts. See, Cambridge Dictionary. Despite the psychological context, the gestalt psychotherapeutic school of thought is not invoked, nor is the specific phenomenological-psychological context of Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen's 'Gestalt experience of Being', see, Guenther (2005), pp. 33–48. Although Richard Rohr uses the word *gestalt* in the context of defining mysticism as 'experiential knowing', I am using the word in its broader transpersonal psychology/psychotherapeutic sense, which is psycho-spiritually connective at the level of the 'true self', also used by Rohr, as well as Jung, see, Rohr (2019b, p. 1).
- ¹⁶ <https://firstthoughtsofgod.com/2017/11/17/rohr-every-time-paul-uses-the-word-flesh-just-replace-it-with-the-word-ego> (accessed on 20 January 2025).
- ¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, as cited in Rohr (2012), p. 105.
- ¹⁸ See note 16 above.
- ¹⁹ Bhagavad-Gita, Discourse IV, 18. See, Prabhupada (1972), p. 76.
- ²⁰ The nature of 'The True Self' is debated and defined differently across the integrative spectrum of psychological/psychotherapeutic schools of thought but is beyond the scope of this thesis. See, Wilber (2000a), pp. 89–114.
- ²¹ Thomas Merton, as cited in King (2001), p. 7.
- ²² Christopher Key Chapple suggests that Merton had read Gandhi's book on the Bhagavad Gita. See Christopher Key Chapple (2021), p. 133.
- ²³ See note 19 above.

- 24 Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927) is the Sufi Mystic who founded the Inayatiyya Sufi Order in the West.
- 25 Sufism is often regarded as a mystical branch of Islam, yet is also a broader universal mysticism that draws on the mystical depth teachings across mystical traditions. Sufism has many different traditions/lineages.
- 26 The mystical enigmatic phrase ‘to be in the world but not of it’ can interestingly be found in both Sufi and Christian contexts. See, St. John, 17: 15–21, NRSV and See www.idriesshahfoundation.org (accessed on 20 January 2025).
- 27 Louis Massignon, as cited in Baker and Henry (2005), pp. 64–65.
- 28 Sidney H. Griffith, “Merton, Massignon, and the challenge of Islam”, in Baker and Henry (2005), p. 65.
- 29 Merton, as cited in, Baker and Henry (2005), p. 256.
- 30 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, as cited in, Baker and Henry (2005), p. 11.
- 31 Burton B. Thurston, “Merton’s Reflections on Sufism”, in Baker and Henry (2005), p. 34.
- 32 Thurston, “Merton’s Reflections on Sufism”, p. 36.
- 33 See note 32 above.
- 34 Merton, as cited in Baker and Henry (2005), p. 46.
- 35 Bonnie Thurston, “Thomas Merton’s interest in Islam: The example of *dhikr*”, in Baker and Henry (2005), p. 47.
- 36 Thomas Merton, as cited in Baker and Henry (2005), p. 36.
- 37 Thurston, “Merton’s Reflections on Sufism”, p. 37.
- 38 See note 37 above.
- 39 Bhagavad-Gita, Discourse IV, 18. See, Prabhupada (1972), p. 76.
- 40 See note 28 above.
- 41 Griffith, “Merton, Massignon, and the challenge of Islam”, p. 65.

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Article

Mystical Experience and Decision Making

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Abstract: The study of decision making is currently significant in various areas of knowledge, particularly in an interdisciplinary approach involving psychologists, economists, sociologists, cognitive scientists, and political scientists. This article explores the decision-making process in a new field: the mystical lived experience; i.e., approaches the *perception of something present as unknown*, the perception of *mystery*, within the decision-making process. It emphasizes that every perception requires a response, more or less conscious, and the mystical lived experience is no exception. The goal is to enhance our understanding and interpretation of the dynamics of mystical experience using a phenomenological analysis of the decision-making process as a hermeneutic key. The philosophical and anthropological background of this article draws from Karl Rahner's transcendental experience, while the phenomenological and psychological perspective is informed by Louis Roy's experiences of transcendence and Juan Martin Velasco's studies on mysticism. The article first establishes the theoretical foundations of this new approach and then applies a decision-making analysis to the significant decisions made by St. Ignatius of Loyola, as detailed in his autobiography.

Keywords: mysticism; decision making; perception; mystery

1. Introduction

Currently, the study of decision making is significant in different areas of knowledge, but above all, in an interdisciplinary approach with the participation of psychologists, economists, sociologists, and political scientists (Morelli et al. 2022; Gonzalez 2014). In the strictly scientific field, cognitive neuroscience can follow brain activity in real time while people are making decisions thanks to functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), electroencephalography (EEG), and computational modeling, and artificial intelligence algorithms can simulate and predict in different contexts how decisions are made (Gold and Shadlen 2007; Kable and Glimcher 2009; Ouden and Cools 2013).

Longitudinal and field studies are important in qualitative studies, which follow decision making over time and within the environments in which they are made, helping to better understand their diachronic development and the influence of the environment on them. These studies also seek a practical application to propose changes in the political, economic, business, and medical fields as well as in almost all dimensions of daily life (Denzin and Lincoln 2017).

Turning to studies on decision making in regard to religious experience, religious beliefs influence moral decisions since they propose an ethical and axiological framework to guide daily behavior, particularly in situations of conflict. They also influence the orientation of personal behavior and the establishment of strategies for weighing risk and uncertainty in the face of certain difficult decisions. In some cases, beliefs can lead to conflicts of conscience arising out of tension with scientific or societal norms, especially when

dealing with situations in which people's lives are at stake (Jonsen et al. 2010; Sulaiman et al. 2022; Oldmixon and Calfano 2007; Elsayed et al. 2023). Obviously, religious beliefs influence the choices made in the face of fundamental human existential problems, such as the meaning of existence, death, and suffering (Frankl 1946; Batson and Schoenrade 1983).

Religious experiences play a very important role in guiding one's existence, providing a horizon of reference that transcends the subject itself, which means assuming life 'religiously'. This kind of experience can be called mystical because it is the perception, without the involvement of the bodily senses, of 'something' or 'someone'.¹ It is said to be a mystical presence because it is related to the etymological meaning of the word mystery: that which is perceived by closing your eyes and then not spoken about to keep the secret of what has been perceived (Wiseman 1993).

Attributing the adjective of 'mystical' to a human experience certainly depends on the cultural and religious context of the person who has it. However, it is always 'something' or 'someone' that is perceived as being present, as a presence, and which motivates a reaction, a response of some kind.² If it is true that there is no perception without a more or less conscious response to what is perceived, then the assumption that guides this research is that mystical experiences do not escape this dynamic. As Berthoz (2006, pp. 89–90) states, "To perceive is to decide".

The present article seeks to justify that assumption from the perspective on the mystical experience presented by Juan Martín Velasco and the proposal of the transcendental analysis made by Karl Rahner with David Chalmers's observations on consciousness and support taken from Louis Roy's phenomenological analysis of the experiences of transcendence. Of course, it is also necessary to approach contemporary investigation on decision making. For the purposes of this paper, a concrete example of decision making within a religious context will be taken from Ignatius of Loyola's *Autobiography*.

In other words, the aim is to deepen the interpretation and understanding of the dynamics in which the mystical experience occurs using an analysis of the decision process as a hermeneutic key. Thus, the first part presents the theoretical foundation of the proposal, while the second develops the practical application of the method of decision analysis to the testimony of Ignatius' mystical experience that he left in his autobiography.

2. Theoretical Basis

In this first part, I will define the two main concepts addressed in this research, the mystical experience and the decision-making process, and then show how they are articulated through a method of decision analysis.

2.1. The Transforming Mystical Experience

At the beginning of his treatise on the mystical phenomenon, Juan Martín Velasco proposes a broad definition of mystical experiences as "inner, immediate, fruitful experiences of the union—in whatever form it is lived—of the subject's depth [*fondo del sujeto*] with the whole, the universe, the absolute, the divine, God, or the Spirit, which take place at a level of consciousness that surpasses that which governs ordinary and objective experience" (Martín Velasco 1999, p. 23). To characterize this experience, the author takes into consideration those common elements present in different mystical/religious or lay traditions that, while respecting the differences, can help to form an idea of what such an experience means (Martín Velasco 1999, pp. 319–56). In it, two poles must be identified: a subject and an intimately perceived presence, totally distinct from the person experiencing it, which cannot be accounted for and therefore can be described as a 'mystery'. However, upon becoming aware of it, that presence presents itself with an all-encompassing character,

where what is perceived is experienced as a totality to which the subject not only feels incorporated but also a participant, producing a novel experience of self.

The subject is aware that they have not caused the experience, rather it has occurred independently of their will. They cannot doubt the direct contact made with this presence, for it has left behind profound feelings of joy, happiness, and peace that cannot be compared to any previous experience they have ever had. Paradoxically, what is perceived cannot be known as one knows objects in everyday life. Rather, it is experienced as an inundation of light that blinds and overwhelms the rational capacity: the only thing the subject knows is that they do not know what the experience is. Nevertheless, the perception of that presence unifies the subject with a totality, a sense of internal integration, leaving them feeling simplified and uncomplicated, as if having reached the one truly necessary thing.

Now, it is not surprising that such an experience gives rise to a profound process of transformation because, if what is perceived is presented as the presence of a *mystery*—with the peculiar characteristics that have been outlined—it cannot leave the subject insensible to making an intimate and personal decision that will be radically transformative in whatever direction the experience leads, whether it is toward rejection, indifference, or acceptance.

To better understand what such a transformation entails, it is helpful to look at the framework offered by St. John of the Cross. For him, transformation is oriented toward union with Mystery. In his case, that means union with the God revealed in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a path realized through mutual love that leads to the union of wills between the faithful subject and their God, renouncing everything that does not contribute to this union. It is a *participatory* transformation:

“When God grants this supernatural favor to the soul, so great a union is caused that all the things of both God and the soul become one in participant transformation, and the soul appears to be God more than a soul. Indeed, it is God by participation. Yet, truly, its being (even though transformed) is naturally as distinct from God’s as it was before, just as the window, although illumined by the ray, has an existence distinct from the ray”. (*Ascent* 2,5,7)³

In this case, the presence of mystery emerges as a loving presence that tends to arouse in the subject an equally loving response that asks that everything standing in the way of a full surrender be set aside in order to conform to the divine will (*Ascent* 2,5,4). The union of likeness is given “when God’s will and the souls are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other. When the soul completely rids itself of what is repugnant and not conformed to the divine will, it rests transformed in God through love” (*Ascent* 2,5,3).

To attain this transformation is to attain spiritual perfection: “a total transformation in the Beloved in which each [God and the soul] surrenders the entire possession of self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life” (*Canticle B* 22,3). Thus, the believer becomes a “shadow of God”, capable of acting like God. Indeed,

through this substantial transformation, it performs in this measure in God and through God what He through Himself does in it. For the will of the two is one will, and thus God’s operation and the soul’s is one. Since God gives Himself with a free and gracious will, so too, the soul (possessing a will the more generous and freer the more it is united with God) gives to God, God Himself in God; and this is a true and complete gift of the soul to God. (*Flame B* 3,78)

In other words,

When there is union of love, the image of the Beloved is so clearly sketched in the will and drawn so intimately and vividly, that it is true to say that the Beloved lives in the lover and the lover in the Beloved. Love produces such likeness in

this transformation of lovers that one can say each is the other and both are one. The reason is that in the union and transformation of love each gives possession of self to the other, and each leaves and exchanges self for the other. Thus, each one lives in the other and is the other, and both are one in the transformation of love. (*Canticle B* 12, 7)

In the relationship of love between God and the believer, there is such an exchange that one can speak of a process of transformation in which one becomes the other and vice versa, a process that leads to unity between the two. In this sense, John affirms that

One should not think it impossible that the soul be capable of so sublime an activity as this breathing in God, through participation as God breathes in it. For, granted that God favors it by union with the Most Blessed Trinity, in which it becomes deiform and God through participation, how could it be incredible that it also understands, knows, and loves –or better that this be done in it– in the Trinity, together with it, as does the Trinity itself! Yet God accomplishes this in the soul through communication and participation. This is transformation in the three Persons in power and wisdom and love, and thus the soul is like God through this transformation. He created it in His image and likeness that it might attain such resemblance. (*Canticle B* 39:4)

The transformative experience of a Christian mystic is taken as an example to highlight the fact that it does not matter how the perceived *mystery* is conceived. What matters is that the only way that there can be a relationship between the two—between the subject and the perceived *mystery*—is through a decision on the part of the person having the experience. For this reason, it is essential to consider the decision-making process in the mystical experience, regardless of whether the *mystery* is conceived of as a personal or impersonal being.

2.2. Anthropological Foundation of Mystical Experience

In the preceding paragraph, we have accepted as a fact of experience that ‘mystical experience’ is the experience of a relationship between the Presence of the Mystery and the person. This section aims to provide an anthropological foundation for this experience, in order to lay the groundwork for an epistemological interpretation of this ‘fact of experience’ from the perspective of the decision-making process as a hermeneutical key. To this end, first of all, an updated interpretation of the decision-making process is approached, then an outline of an interdisciplinary theoretical framework is given to situate it anthropologically, and the conclusion will show that the subject–Presence relationship is a communicative relationship implying the person’s decision-making process in the face of the Presence experienced.

2.2.1. The Decision-Making Process

In her book, *Judgement and Decision-Making in the Lab and the World*, Nancy S. Kim presents three models of decision making that have been identified as a result of psychological and neuroscientific research in this field (Kim 2018, pp. 9–10). The first model is the descriptive, which explains the way in which people actually make their decisions, without any moral consideration. The second one is the normative, where the decision-maker follows a protocol to know the possible options and their consequences and, by comparing them, is guided to make a choice following an order of preferences. Finally, the third model is the prescriptive, which combines the two previous models, i.e., faced with an uncertain situation, the theoretically possible decisions are considered and the one that responds to the uncertain situation in the best way realistically possible is chosen.

Focusing our attention on descriptive models, which are more akin to the decision-making process that interests us, those that follow a *dual process* stand out, i.e., decision making is approached from two mental strategies. Kahneman (2012, pp. 19–30) calls the first *System 1* and the second *System 2*, although more recently other researchers call them *Type 1* and *Type 2* (Evans and Stanovich 2013, pp. 223–41). The first is a fast, intuitive, automatic, and emotional decision-making process, not necessarily conscious and which does not need memory to function and is also autonomous from other systems. The second process is rather reflective, deliberate, sequential, controlled, rational, and conscious. It needs memory to function and uses hypothetical and analytical reasoning (*cognitive decoupling*). It is considered that, evolutionarily, the former precedes the latter, as it corresponds better to animal cognition and basic emotions, while the latter is akin to human behavior and reflects complex emotions. They are different, but the authors discuss whether both processes are executed simultaneously or whether the second one is executed only when the first one fails.

Nowadays, the importance of the emotional dimension in decision making is clear, an aspect that was traditionally neglected due to an exclusively rational conception of that process.⁴ Thanks to the advances made in experimental research, we must consider emotion as a partner that intervenes inseparably at the moment of making a decision.⁵ In this respect, the approach developed by Antonio Damasio is outstanding.

It is not possible to detail Damasio's proposal in this paper (Damasio 1994, p. 147), but it is important to point out that every feeling is constructed from the awareness of the mental images perceived (cognitive aspect) and concomitant emotional states. To explain this hermeneutic circle, the author proposes constructs such as *somatic markers*, which are physiological responses to past experiences that are associated with emotions that arise in the present moment and guide—more or less consciously—the process of decision making. These *markers* act on the backdrop of *background feelings*, which are the stable emotional *background* of the subject (Zas Friz De Col 2021, pp. 325–52).

In summary, at the present moment of research, it is clear that there are two ways of making decisions: one is fast and intuitive, and the other, slow and meditative. It is also clear that decision making implies the decisive participation of the emotional dimension of the subject and not exclusively the participation of the cognitive dimension. The interesting thing about these approaches is that empirical research is reaching very high levels of sophistication to explain phenomena of human consciousness that, until recently, were considered difficult to access. However, in order to anthropologically frame the mystical experience, it is necessary to situate the decision-making process in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. Therefore, I will present three authors who, from a philosophical, psychological, and phenomenological perspective, help to this end.

2.2.2. Three Authors for a Theoretical Framework: Karl Rahner, David Chalmers, and Louis Roy

According to Rahner, the human being, by being human, is a self-conscious being who knows himself as a subjectivity that has the capacity to know and make decisions. This capacity constitutes, for Rahner, the *transcendental experience*, which makes possible the exercise of concrete acts of human knowledge and will.⁶ This capacity allows us to transcend and overcome the finitude of our historical condition, thus opening us up to the mystery of our existence and of the world. The paradox of this condition is that, although we recognize that hawse have not given ourselves the capacity to be self-conscious, nevertheless, we realize that because of this capacity, we are capable of self-transcendence towards the whole of reality. In this sense, we discover and know ourselves as a *transcendental subject* entrusted to ourselves, a bio-psychic unity conscious of our finitude as well as an openness to the infinite, which precedes the concrete acts of knowing and deciding.

For this reason, Rahner affirms that persons are and remain transcendent beings, that is, always having the silent and uncontrollable infinity of reality present as mystery. This makes us totally open to this mystery, in which we become aware of ourselves as persons and as subjects (see Rahner 1992, p. 35). The human transcendental “is rather a relationship which does not establish itself by its own power, but is experienced as something which was established by and is at the disposal of another, and which is grounded in the abyss of ineffable mystery” (Rahner 1992, p. 68).

When this transcendental subject finds itself as the subject of a mystical experience, in which a Presence with the characteristics previously described is perceived, then that experience places that person at the very root of their self-aware human condition because the mystery of the perceived Presence refers them to the perception of the mystery of the origin of their capacity to know and decide: thus, in perceiving the mystery of the Presence, they simultaneously perceive the mystery of their own human condition and from this experience arises within the question of the meaning of the perceived mystery in its dual—subjective and objective—aspect given by the Presence. Therefore, paraphrasing Rahner, reflection on the meaning of life and its mystery refers to a vital experience that precedes the reflexive question, “[S]peaking of God is the reflection which points to a more original, unthematic, and unreflexive knowledge of God” (Rahner 1992, p. 52; italics in the original). In reality, reflection on the meaning of life that is motivated by the mystical experience only makes the subject aware that their self-awareness and reality in its totality are a mystery.

According to Rahner, through this experience, the subject becomes aware of this condition of mystery. Therefore, this condition makes the awareness possible, not the other way around. Precisely, then, the transcendental experience is the root of the mystery of the human condition and of reality, from which we orient ourselves to mystery, because we are nestled within and are referred to it. It is an orientation that does not depend on awareness, but on the human condition as human. “This original experience is always present, and it should not be confused with the objectifying, although necessary, reflection upon man’s transcendental orientation towards mystery” (Rahner 1992, p. 53).

The *transcendentality* of the human condition is the condition of possibility of the mystical experience because, through it, the subject opens themselves to the unfathomable mystery of their condition as a thinking subject who is capable of making a decision in the encounter with a Presence that is perceived as something that entirely surpasses them. That is why, through *transcendentality*, the subject perceives themselves as a historically determined unity and, at the same time, capable of going beyond that determination.

The transcendental experience that makes the mystical experience possible orients the human being from the mystery of the human condition to the mystery that is outside the person, but which allows them to perceive that it is not a question of two mysteries, but the same unique mystery. However, the mystery of Presence does not allow itself to be circumscribed in the historical dimension of the same experience, for it goes beyond it. Mystery cannot be categorized, otherwise it would cease to be a mystery in its *transcendentality*. Moreover, transcendental experience is what allows the subject to perceive themselves as a subject, distinct from their perception of Presence. Infinity, transcendence and creatureliness go together (Rahner 1992, p. 54).

Due to the transcendental experience that is their foundation, the mystical experience makes it possible for the subject—from their subjectivity—to perceive themselves as founded from the mystery, simultaneously autonomous before it, but without being able to dispose of it, in an experience that cannot be objectified. Thus, for Rahner, the horizon of transcendence is a mystery: “this nameless and indefinable term of transcendence, which is distinguished from everything else only from its own side, and hence differentiates

everything else from itself, and which is the norm for everything and is beyond all other norms, this term becomes that which is absolutely beyond our disposal.” (Rahner 1992, p. 95). However, it is not until the person experiences themselves as a free subject, responsible before God, and accepts this responsibility that they can understand what autonomy is and understand that it does not decrease, but increases, in the same proportion as dependence on God. On this point, the only relevant matter is that we are both independent and, in light of what grounds us, also dependent (see Rahner 1992, p. 114). What is properly human, that which makes it possible to exercise freedom through knowledge and the capacity to choose autonomously, lies in and depends on the condition of anonymous mystery. In other words, the transcendent mystery allows itself to be perceived historically because it is already present transcendentally in the subject.

Having grasped Rahner’s philosophical proposal, it would now be worthwhile to associate the phenomenological interpretation that David Chalmers makes of the dynamics with which human consciousness acts (Zas Friz De Col 2019, pp. 74–75). According to Chalmers, we can distinguish two inseparable dimensions in the unity of consciousness: the phenomenal (PhC) and the psychological (PsC). The first is the self-consciousness that the subject of the experience has of being the one who experiences it, while the second is the content of the experience, the experience itself. If the PhC is a non-conceptual intuition of the self, an immediate conscious awareness of a self that knows itself to be itself, the PsC is rather the capacity of the PhC to become aware of the experience’s perceived contents (Chalmers 1999, p. 27). This makes possible the passage from perception to reflection because in the PhC there is an awareness of what is perceived through the PsC in a double register that is simultaneously cognitive and affective. What has been perceived is then reflected upon and is issued a critical judgment. These judgments have a progression that occurs in three successive levels: in the first one, the perception of something is verified (“I see an apple”) which produces, in second moment, the cognitive and affective awareness of what has been seen (“I see the apple and I would like to eat it,”), and, finally, a reflective type of judgment can be produced that goes beyond the two preceding ones: “Why do I want to eat that apple?”.

Applying this trilogy to mystical experience one would have (1) the impression of having perceived the presence of ‘something’ that (2) has left a positive affective and cognitive resonance and that (3) raises the question: “What kind of experience is this?”.

A more detailed analysis of this type of experience is offered by Louis Roy with his reflections on transcendent experience, which he defines as “*an apprehension of the infinite through feeling, in a particular circumstance*” (L. Roy 2001, p. 4, italics in the original). These can be very brief episodic perceptions that, unexpectedly, break into the person’s everyday life. They give “the strong impression of being in touch with something that absolutely transcends us” (L. Roy 2021, p. 20), a something that escapes our power and control, and which is impossible to fully understand or define.

These episodes usually occur without warning during everyday life. They are grasped immediately and intuitively. For Roy, the relationship between the person and the perceived ‘mystical’ presence is through human intentionality, which is “that by which we come to know transcendence, while transcendence is the ontological grounding of intentionality” (L. Roy 2001, p. 153). The transcendent is “that which absolutely surpasses the universe of finite beings, not in terms of size or power, but in terms of meaningfulness, truth, and worth—in a word, in terms of being” (L. Roy 2001, p. 156). This analysis corresponds to the transcendental constitution of the subject (Rahner) and to the double dimension of human consciousness (Chalmers).

The perception of such Presence is not given through the bodily senses, however, there can be no doubt that it is the perception of ‘something’ real. They are transcendent

experiences lived from the human transcendental condition; therefore, they are experienced with a strong sense of their reality:

People who have the strong impression that they have been touched by the infinite are right; they can trust their own interpretation provided they are willing to deepen it and, if necessary, allow it to redirect their life; philosophy and world religions do offer them frames of reference in which transcendent experience and the transformation that ensues both make sense. (L. Roy 2001, p. 187)

These experiences—always, according to Roy—have a dual, indivisible dimension: a cognitive one, because the experience of transcendence leaves ‘something’ that must be interpreted in some way, just as any other experience, and an emotional one, because it leaves the sensation of having been in contact with ‘something’ totally transcendental and infinite. These experiences place the person in

a relationship with a unique unknown pronounced to be non-finite, in-finite. . . . the central judgment that is thereby conveyed is, for the most part, negative: [We find ourselves] in the presence of a mystery, an Other which appears totally different from all worldly beings. Therefore, the discovery that stands at the heart of transcendent experience and that can be formulated in the statement, ‘there is something totally different here’, includes a little amount of affirmation and a vast amount of negation. (L. Roy 2001, p. 166)

For Roy, experiences of transcendence and the feeling they leave behind can be interpreted as experiences of God, because in them one has, on the one hand, the impression that reality presents itself to the personal conscience as ‘insufficient’ and, on the other hand, at the same time, a strong feeling of fullness. Therefore, we “reasonably affirm that the Holy Spirit has touched us, both in our feelings and in our thoughts” (L. Roy 2021, p. 83).

Roy classifies experiences of transcendence into four types: aesthetic, ontological, ethical, and interpersonal (L. Roy 2001, pp. 14–24).⁷ In the first, aesthetic ones, there is a very vivid perception of nature, as if one were participating in it by being part of its greater whole or, also, the vivid impression of being surpassed by the forces of nature. In the ontological ones, there is a perception of the contrast between being and non-being, between contingent finitude and stable and eternal being, perceiving the presence of deeper reality in an imprecise way, beyond reality itself. In ethical experiences, the permanent valence of values is experienced above historical and cultural contingencies, manifesting a contrast to anti-values. Finally, in interpersonal experiences of transcendence, one experiences the desire for attraction and communion with another person, or rather that of rejection and repulsion, in a love—hate dynamic.

Roy also analyzes factors commonly present in these four types of experience of transcendence and finds six elements to deciphering them (L. Roy 2021, pp. 15–26). Each of these experiences (1) has a preparation time that depends on the personal situation of the subject, (2) occurs on a specific historical occasion, in which they manifest dimensions of (3) feeling and (4) discovery, respectively, leading to the awareness of a vital feeling that responds to the pleasurable perception of something infinite, which (5) requires an interpretation and (6) bears fruit in the subject of the experience, depending on the attitude that the subject assumes in light of what is experienced.

It is interesting to note that the role of decision making is not extensively developed in Rahner’s transcendental approach, and it is not explicitly assumed either by Chalmers or by Roy. There is no doubt that these analyses are pertinent to providing a frame of reference for the mystical experiences discussed in the first section. However, the analysis of these experiences from the dynamics of the decision-making process can help to understand them in even greater detail.

2.2.3. The Decision-Making Process as Communicative and Transformative Mediation

Mystical experiences, which were discussed at the beginning of this article (Section 2.1), are experiences in which there is contact, communication with a Presence that presents itself as a ‘mystery’, in the face of which the subject feels intimately called to make a decision. The decisional aspect does not appear central in Rahner’s philosophical/theological analysis or in the phenomenological analyses of Chalmers and Roy. I would like to bring it to the forefront of the theoretical considerations of how the decision-making process is considered today (Section 2.2.1), highlighting the two ways of making decisions (fast/intuitive and slow/meditative) and the role of the emotions in decision making. Although there is a lack of development of the decisional aspect in the authors cited above and in the state of current studies on the subject, ‘mystical’ experiences (Martin Velasco) can be identified with experiences of transcendence (Roy), which then opens the way for an approach that gives the decision-making process centrality in a communicative and transformative relationship between the subject and the Presence. This section will thus deal with the act of deciding, looking at it closely on the basis of the preceding analysis.

It is a communicative act because the Presence is presented in the subject’s perceptual field, communicating ‘something’, a cognitive content and an emotional effect, in the face of which, after becoming aware of the experience and reflecting on it, the subject must reach a judgment regarding what has been experienced and make a decision in the face of what has been perceived. The decision can be of an immediate/intuitive or a slow/meditative type, but ought to include in a very incisive way the emotional dimension. Now, whatever decision is made in the face of the p(P)presence, it certainly implies an important transformation, given the characteristics that such an experience presents and signifies in the life of the person who has had the encounter.⁸

When a subject makes a decision, they select a preference, which indicates a precise option for orientation in a given situation. The decision ends a deliberation after evaluating a situation and rearranges the preceding order (Zas Friz De Col 2012, pp. 115–28). Taking this into account, in a decision-making process there are six aspects (some with dual characteristics) to be considered (Zas Friz De Col 2020, pp. 11–20; 2019, pp. 76–86): (1) the **context** and the **occasion** of the decision; (2) the perception of what triggers the initiation of the decision-making process, which can be call **motions** (*mociones*); (3) the **awareness** of the cognitive contents and the affective resonance of the motion that motivates the process; (4) the object of **reflection** that should end with a **judgment** (5) from which a **decision** is explicitly formulated; and (6) the **consequences** of the assumed decision are accepted.

Applying this analysis to mystical experiences of transcendence, we find the same steps: (1) they occur in a given context and occasion, (2) contact is made with the Presence of the Mystery, of which one (3) becomes aware, more or less explicitly, by the cognitive contents it leaves together with the affective resonances it produces, upon which the person (4) reflects and comes to formulate a judgment in order to (5) make a decision and (6) responsibly assume its consequences, which produces a transformation, a reordering of the person’s preceding priorities. Obviously, the transformative process will depend on the decisions that the person makes responsibly in the face of the ‘mystical’ motions received, which the person perceives with greater or lesser attention according to the ‘mystical’ orientation of their life, that is, according to the way they personalize their relationship with Mystery, in a positive or negative sense, since the decisions chosen will determine how they see themselves in relation to it.

3. Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis of the Decisions of St. Ignatius of Loyola

The theoretical approach developed up to this point has had the purpose of laying the foundations of what will be presented below: a practical example of the decisional analysis in the mystical experience over time in its dual—synchronic and diachronic—aspect. It has become clear that, in the mystical experience, there is a perception of a Presence that becomes present to the subject as a Mystery and in the face of which the subject must make an interpretation and give a response, formulating a decision. In this relationship, the responsible transformation of the subject depends on the decisions made in light of the *motions* (*mociones*) perceived. To the extent that this relationship deepens, the subject will be more and more attentive to the motions received, which will lead to making more conscious decisions. From this theoretical perspective, briefly summarized, I will present a synchronic analysis of six decisions made by St. Ignatius of Loyola as recorded in his autobiography, in order to make a second, diachronic, analysis of all of them (Zas Friz De Col 2022).

3.1. Synchronic Analysis

The *Autobiography* is a text that gathers the narration that St. Ignatius makes of his life to Luis Gonzalez de Camara in three different periods: August 1553, March 1555 and between September and October of the same year, 1555. The intention of the work is to collect the memoirs of the holy founder so that his followers in the Society of Jesus would have it as a stimulus for their relationship with the Mystery of God. In this sense, the text responds to the question of how Ignatius' relationship with the Presence of that Mystery had developed since his conversion in 1521 up to the time of the narrative (Rambla 2015, pp. 197–201). The following are six of the main decisions that played an important role in his life, as recorded in the aforementioned text.

The **context** of the first decision is from the year 1521, when Ignatius is 30 years old and is in the family home in Loyola, convalescing from a war wound, unable to move from his bed. To pass his free time, he asks for books on chivalry, but there are none to be found. Instead, he is given a book on the life of Jesus and another on the lives of the saints. The **occasion** of the experience being analyzed is the reading of these books. Progressing in the reading, he is more and more amazed by the penances that the saints carry out and he begins to imagine that he does them as well. At other times, he imagines that he performs feats to win the admiration of a noble lady with whom he is in love. But he perceives a difference in the two **motions** that occur in his state of mind and becomes **aware** that while he imagines the holy penances, he is consoled interiorly in a more intense and stable way than when he perceives to be imagining the noble lady. He is so struck by this fact that he begins to **reflect** on it until he reaches a **judgment**: to go to Jerusalem imitating the penitents, which he **decides** to put into practice as soon as he recovers from his wound, coherently assuming all the **consequences** of this decision, as recorded in his autobiography.

Recovered from his convalescence, Ignatius went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land between July and October 1523. During his stay in Jerusalem, the **context** of the second decision takes place. Ignatius wants to stay in the city out of devotion to Jesus and to help 'souls'. To do so, he must ask permission from the provincial of the Franciscan friars, which is the **occasion** of the decision: the provincial tells him that he cannot stay, which is presented as the **motion** that initiates the new decision-making process. As can be assumed—because it does not appear in the text of the *Autobiography*—he must have received the decision of the provincial as bad news and with displeasure (the **awareness** of the motion), which moves him to **reflect** on what he must do to follow God's will, until he reaches a clear **judgment** and **decides** to abide by the decision of the provincial and return to Venice (**consequence**).

The decision to leave the Holy Land against his wishes provides the **context** and **occasion** for the third decision. When Ignatius sets out on his return journey in the autumn of 1524, he wonders what he should do; this is the **motion** that has him preoccupied (**awareness**) and upon which he **reflects** until he comes to a **judgment** and **decides to go** to study in Barcelona, where he remains from 1524 to 1526 (**consequence**).

In the Spring of 1526, he moved to the University of Alcalá de Henares to continue his studies. His lifestyle aroused the suspicions of the Holy Inquisition, for which he underwent several trials. In this **context**, the **occasion** that prepares the fourth decision arises. Finally, the sentence is pronounced and Ignatius is absolved of all charges and suspicions. But he is ordered not to speak of religious matters with other people for a period of four years, until he concludes his studies. This is the **motion** that makes him doubt what he should do in the face of the sentence (**awareness**) and, **reflecting** and asking for advice from the Archbishop of Valladolid, he clearly **judgets** that he should follow the advice he is given, so he **decides** to go to study at the University of Salamanca, which he does (**consequences**).

In July 1527, he is in Salamanca, but as soon as he arrives, he, once again, encounters problems with the ecclesiastical authorities, which provides the **context** for the fifth decision. The occasion arose when, after being subjected to interrogations and imprisoned for three weeks, he was sentenced, leaving him free but imposing on him, as in Alcalá, the condition that he did not speak of things of God until he had finished his studies. This is the **motion** he becomes **aware** of by the effects it produces and on which he **reflects** until he reaches a **judgment** and **decides** to go to study in Paris (**consequences**).

In February of 1528, Ignatius arrived in Paris and left there for the last time in April of 1535. Between those years, Ignatius managed to form a group of companions who were determined to stay together. This is the **context** of the sixth decision. The **occasion** occurs when Ignatius' doctor recommends for him to leave the city for health reasons, in search of his native air. However, the trip is also the first step in putting into action a plan that Ignatius had thought of with his companions, thanks to the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises*. In fact, the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises* was the **motion** that made the group **aware** of a new way of living the Gospel, which is why they **reflected** until arriving at a clear judgment that what they had to do was to go and live in Jerusalem, but **decided** that, if after a year they did not manage to get there from Venice, they would go to the Pope to place themselves at his service. When in fact, after a year, they were not able to sail, they went to Rome in November 1537 to place themselves at the Pope's orders (**consequences**).

3.2. Diachronic Analysis

Federico Ruiz has reinterpreted the classical outline of the development of the Christian life where the beginner is in the purgative stage, followed by the illuminative stage, and reaching perfection in the unitive one. He considered it rigid and unconnected with the psychological maturation of a person (Ruiz 2001, pp. 509–60).

For these reasons, he proposes a holistic and integral approach to personal development in which he also integrates the path of spiritual progress toward a maturing relationship with Mystery. He lists six stages: initiation, personalization, internalization, crisis, maturity, and death/glorification.

Christian *initiation* does not properly begin with baptism but with conversion. In the next stage, that of *personalization*, conversion is consolidated and one begins to consciously organize one's life around the new values discovered through conversion. The third phase is *internalization*: the faithful become accustomed to making the experience of their relationship with the Mystery more and more explicit and conscious in their daily lives. The following stage, the fourth, corresponds to *crisis*. In the normal development of spiritual

life, certain passages become necessary in which the previously internalized attitude is progressively purified (the *nights of the spirit*). The crisis is initiated when a balanced situation becomes unstable and requires transitioning to a new stability in the personal relationship with Mystery. The next stage, *maturity*, is that provisional ‘perfection’ that can be accessed in this life, where one achieves a realistic view of the Mystery of God, excluding extraordinary phenomena as a sign of Christian maturity. One acquires a deep inner stability in the relationship with God that corresponds, in Christian terminology, to a state of *holiness* or *deification*. In the last stage, Ruiz calls *death glorification*, which includes the period of old age, not forgetting those stages of ‘diminishment’ such as illness, accidents, or ‘misfortunes’ that happen suddenly and which, not infrequently, anticipate death or a more or less permanent state of physical or psychological diminishment.

Interpreting the synchronic analysis of the six decisions from Ruiz’s diachronic perspective, it can be affirmed that the historical transformation of Ignatius’ ‘mystical’ experience—if it can be called that—*initiates* when he reflects on the perception of two states of mind that arise as he imagines two different situations, ultimately deciding to imitate the penitent saints by going to Jerusalem. He decides simply because, of the two options, it is the one that he finds most emotionally exciting. He does not reason, he lets himself be carried away by enthusiasm. But when he is forced to leave Jerusalem—accepting the fact that he is not allowed to stay and thus renouncing the desire for which he undertook the journey—then he must decide what to do in a much more reflective way. There are no more wild exhilarations, he must reflect seriously, and he does so from an intentionality that is becoming more and more conscious. He discovers more and more clearly the action of the Presence within him and it motivates him progressively with greater lucidity in making his decisions.

The knowledge of how this Presence works in his intimacy and the progressive *personalization* and *interiorization* of this knowledge is what orients Ignatius’ relationship with Mystery in an increasingly mature, conscious, and reflective way. That knowledge is nothing other than the discernment of the motions that Ignatius identifies as coming—directly or indirectly—from the very Presence of Mystery, which he calls the ‘good spirit’ as opposed to other motions that are also present, but which come from the ‘bad spirit’. This is the compass that Ignatius follows in order to act according to the will of Mystery, which is an obedience motivated by love, since ‘obeying’ the Mystery of the good spirit is possible only in a loving relationship with it. For this reason, it can be affirmed that the discernment of the motions (*mociones*) of the two spirits, as a decision-making process, is the mediation that unites Ignatius to Mystery. In this sense, it is also important to state that one cannot find a ‘dark night of the soul’ in his mystical development, owing precisely to the practice of the discernment of spirits that purifies him constantly through his decisions.

Ignatius’ ‘mystical’ *maturation* is directly proportional to the development of his capacity for discernment. It is understood as a particular modality of decision making with which he orients himself to interpret the motions he receives from the two spirits. It is important to clarify, as we have seen, that motions are not necessarily divine inspirations, but also events in personal history that need to be interpreted from the experience of Mystery in order to make decisions and orient one’s life in a concrete way. Ignatius himself affirms in the *Spiritual Exercises* that these motions may or may not have a cause that precedes them. If they do not have a cause, it is probable that they come directly from the Presence, but if they are motions (*mociones*) perceived through some cause, such as a historical situation, a reading, a conversation, etc., they do not cease to orient the subject divinely. For, even if the motion does not come directly from an intervention of the Presence, it can always be co-intuited in the awareness of the motion.⁹ For this reason, it is not enough just to perceive the motion (*moción*), but to analyze it through awareness

in its dual dimension: cognitive and affective, which is what is reflected upon in order to arrive at a judgment and make a decision. Finally, the last stage, death glorification, is not considered in the *Autobiography* of Ignatius, but is well known that he suffered throughout his life from many illnesses, dying in Rome on 31 July 1556.

At this point, it only remains to conclude this section by answering a question: is it possible to extrapolate Ignatius' experience to mystical experiences in non-Christian contexts? For the moment, the answer can only be hypothesized in relation to non-Christian religions, since there are no analyses available. However, it can be assumed that in them, there must also be the perception of 'something' that is interpreted—although perhaps not with the same word—but within the realm of 'mystery'. In any case, this 'something' is perceived and interpreted as a 'presence' in the face of which a decision must be made. In this sense, it can be hypothesized that an analysis such as the one proposed here is possible. What is available is a publication—although it is debatable whether it belongs to the religious realm or not—where the decisional analysis, as proposed in this section, is applied to the *Diary* of Etty Hillesum (Csaba 2021, pp. 127–79).

4. Conclusions

The development of the first part, which included the phenomenology of Martín Velasco, the transcendental analysis of Karl Rahner, the reflection on consciousness of David Chalmers, the transcendental experiences of Louis Roy, and the formulation of an outline for interpreting the decision-making process, has led to the establishment of a theoretical framework to justify the analysis of decisions that has been carried out in the second part of the article on the text of the *Autobiography* of Ignatius of Loyola. Both parts give unity to a strategy to answer the question whether it is possible to establish a link between the mystical experience and the decision-making process, as implicitly formulated in the title of the article.

In fact, the definition of mystical experience noted in the introduction, like the perception of the Presence of Mystery that motivates a decision in the subject who has perceived it, when analyzed from the decision-making process defined in the first part and applied in the second part to Ignatius of Loyola, allows us to formulate a conclusion: at least in the Christian experience, but possibly in any numinous experience (Otto), it is possible to identify the perception of the Presence of Mystery (motion) and the decision of the subject (decision) in the decision-making process in a phenomenologically, anthropologically, and psychologically integrated way. The so-called mystical experiences do not escape this dynamic: by better understanding their human dynamism, justice is better done to transcendent Mystery.

The transcendent dimension of the human condition is oriented towards the encounter of something that presents itself as Mystery and this is understood as an authentically human process, not ideologically superadded to its condition of intelligent being. By integrating the motion of Mystery and the decision of the subject who perceives it in the decision-making process, it is possible to resize the 'ineffability' of the mystical experience without touching the transcendent dimension of the Mystery, but better elucidating the human dynamics involved. This seems important for interpreting mystical motions from a phenomenological and psychological perspective: all human perception, in order to be so, must be conscious, for there is no perception without awareness and without decision, because what is perceived is always perceived from a cognitive content and an emotional reaction, and it is on this content and this reaction that one reflects, more or less consciously, until arriving at a judgment and concluding the process by making a decision regarding what has been perceived. Finally, decisional analysis as has been outlined can be an instrument that, from an anthropological perspective, facilitates dialogue

between religions and rapprochement with the secularized mentality of our time because no phenomenon is excluded a priori from the perceptual field and, therefore, from the decision-making process.

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Notes

- ¹ To avoid ambiguities in the use of the term ‘perception’, the only way to become aware of the divine presence, or the divine, is by perceiving it. The verb to perceive must be taken in a broad sense: perceiving God, or what is divine, it is possible not only through the bodily senses, but also through its direct intervention in the intimate consciousness of the person. In this case, the perceiver affirms, pure and simple, that what he perceives is something real, that he is faced with *something* or *someone*. Intuition and insight have different nuances, although they can form part of the perceptual process. The mystical experience is not a perception but rather begins with a perception of which one becomes aware due to the cognitive content it leaves and the affective effect it produces. One reflects on this and reaches a judgment in order to decide in the face of what has been perceived.
- ² “Mystical religious texts are those that witness to another form of divine presence, one that can, indeed, sometimes be attained within the context of the ordinary religious observances, but which need not be. What differentiates it from other forms of religious consciousness is its presentation as both subjectively and objectively more direct, even at times as immediate” (McGinn 1990, XIX).
- ³ *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (1979). The titles are abbreviated in this way: The Ascent of Mount Carmel: *Ascent*, followed by the number of the book, chapter and paragraph; Spiritual Canticle B: *Canticle B*; and The Living Flame of Love B: *Flame B*, both followed by the number of the stanza and paragraph.
- ⁴ Considering, for example, the relationship between the cognitive and emotional dimension studied in research on pathological gambling, understood as an alteration of the decision-making process, a directly proportional relationship between impulsivity and cognitive impairment in decision making is evident (S. Roy 2016, p. 45).
- ⁵ Levine (2024). It is worth including the *abstract* of the article: “The traditional idea of emotion and cognition in Western culture is that emotion is separate from, and inferior to, cognition. This article reviews results from experimental neuroscience that refute this notion and support the idea that emotion and cognition are partners that depend on each other for organized decision making. Cooperation between cortical and subcortical parts of the brain is essential for behavior that adapts successfully to the environment in pursuit of goals. Concurrently, there has been a rich development of computational neural network theories that combine emotion as a source of values with reason as a process of discerning the actions that will best implement those values. Incorporating the partnership view of emotion and cognition encourages integration of those two aspects of the psyche, with benefit both for mental illness treatment and for making society more cooperative”.
- ⁶ “Transcendental experience is the experience of *transcendence*, in which experience in the structure of the subject and therefore also the ultimate structure of every conceivable object of knowledge are present together and in identity. This transcendental experience, of course, is not merely an experience of pure knowledge, but also of the will and of freedom. The same character of transcendental belongs to them, so that basically one can ask about the source and the destiny of the subject as a knowing being and as a free being together” (Rahner 1992, pp. 20–21, italics from the original).
- ⁷ Unfortunately, there is no place here to show some examples of each of the four different types.
- ⁸ For the theme of transformation from a Christian perspective, see (Zas Friz De Col 2022, pp. 4–9).
- ⁹ The *co-intuition* “es un conocimiento ‘implicado’ en otro ser, ‘acompañado’ de otro ser: De ahí la preposición *cum* delante de la palabra *intuición*” (Rodríguez-Bachiller 1976, p. 51); in other words, it is “la visión simultánea de Dios y las criaturas en un solo acto, sin necesidad de ilación lógica” (González de Cardedal 1966, p. 551).

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Article

William James: The Mystical Experimentation of a Sick Soul

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Abstract: Especially in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James developed the polar categories of healthy-minded individuals content with their once-born religion versus sick souls who need to become twice-born in order to find religious peace. Biographers of James have concluded that he does not fit well under either of his polar categories. Drawing on both data about James' life and on his philosophical and theological writings, I demur from the biographers' conclusion and instead advance the thesis that the overall pattern of William James' life is best understood as a sick soul searching for—and ultimately finding—twice-born religion in connection with mystical experiences. Notably, James attempted to theorize about mystical experiences as connecting with divine reality/ies in naturalistic ways compatible with scientific knowledge of his time. Scientific knowledge today makes it more difficult to find evidence of direct divine input in religious experiences, yet one might find value in religious experiences in terms of James' pragmatic criterion for truth: their beneficial or adaptive effects.

Keywords: compounding of consciousnesses; healthy-minded religion; monism; mystical experience; the sick soul; the subliminal; William James

1. Introduction

William James stands as one of the founders of modern psychology, with his *Principles of Psychology* still a standard today, and as a prime founder of pragmatism, the only major “made-in-America” philosophical movement. James also became a major theorist and philosopher of religion, especially noted for giving the prestigious Gifford Lectures on natural theology during 1901–1902, published in 1902 as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In that work, James distinguishes between the religiously healthy-minded soul versus the sick soul. Drawing upon both details of James' life and his writings in the philosophy of religion, I will advance the thesis that, even with its many ups and downs, the overall pattern of William James' life is best understood as a sick soul searching for—and ultimately finding—twice-born religion in connection with mystical experiences. I will also document how James maintains that mystical (and other religious experiences) can be compatible with the scientific knowledge of his time.

My thesis runs counter to the conclusions of James' major biographers. The most significant include the classic *The Thought and Character of William James* by Ralph Barton Perry (1935) and biographies by W. B. Lewis (1991), Gerald E. Myers (1986), and Lloyd Morris (1950), as well as G. William Barnard's *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (1997). This conclusion appears to be a commonplace still with purchase: David A. Dilworth very recently stated that “James was famously neither” [healthy-minded nor a sick-soul] (Dilworth 2023, p. 384). While utilizing information and insights from those and other capable biographers, this article will differ from most of these works in its primary focus on James' mystical inclinations and from all of them in forging new directions on how James' life was influenced in a mystical vein. Crucially, as suggested above, it will frame James' mystical journey with reference to his own polar categories of healthy-minded individuals content with their once-born religion versus sick souls who need to become twice-born in order to find religious peace. Perry concludes

that James' character "escapes simple formulation" (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 670), including healthy-mindedness versus soul-sickness that reaches twice-born status. Perry reasons that James' life manifested many crises and recoveries, rather than a simple "before/after" dichotomy (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 671). Myers for his part labels James as a category breaker whose life more or less equally combined both poles of various binaries, including optimism/pessimism and joy/sadness (Myers 1986, pp. 41, 469). Myers, however, does not consider that the sick soul or "divided self"—a term also frequently invoked by James—often already mixes optimism and pessimism. Therefore, after tracing James' derivation and use of the categories, I will advance the thesis that, even with its many ups and downs, the overall pattern of William James' life is best understood as a sick soul searching for—and ultimately finding—twice-born religion in connection with mystical experiences.

James borrowed the terms "once born" and "twice born" from Francis W. Newman's *The Soul: Its Sorrows and Its Aspirations* (Myers 1986, p. 608, n. 55). Newman characterized the once-born religious believer as possessing a child-like happiness and as comfortable with how that belief made sense of, and helped one cope with, evil (Myers 1986, p. 486). James first employs Newman's pair, and especially the related "sick soul", in his introduction as the editor of *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James*, an 1885 anthology of some of his father's later writings (Morris 1950, p. 57). James regarded his Calvinist father as "'all sicklied o'er' with a sense of weakness" until he surrendered himself to God (Lewis 1991, pp. 354–56).

In *Literary Remains*, James states that potentially every person could succumb to soul-sickness, like his father had before his "second birth". However, several years later in an article entitled, "Is Life Worth Living?" James expounds that many people are constitutionally inclined towards either a pessimistic or optimistic temperament (James 1956, pp. 33–35). James' interpretation of his own bouts with depression as arising solely or primarily from physiological causes (Myers 1986, pp. 49–50) likely influenced this belief that different individuals have a nature more or less pessimistic (with many others more or less equally prone to periods of "radiance" or "dreariness" (James 1956, p. 34)). Of course, James recognized that one's experiences and one's own resolve would affect to what extent a person might succumb to a pessimistic outlook. I will soon write more on this as I explore the biographical factors that figure into James' "soul-sickness", into a radical sense of "wrongness" (James 1902, p. 209) in himself and in the world.

2. James' Physical and Mental Health

The first factor to consider is James' poor health as a young man and then later in life. Though his two younger brothers enlisted in the Union Army, his frailty apparently excused him from joining them (Lewis 1991, p. 119; Perry 1935, vol. 1, p. 202, vol. 2, p. 672; Myers 1986, p. 31). Interrupting his medical studies in 1865 for the Thayer Expedition in biology to Brazil, James unfortunately contracted varioloid, a mild form of smallpox. Upon his recovery, he wrote that "his coming was a mistake", opining that he apparently was "cut out for a speculative rather than active life" (Lewis 1991, p. 174). He did, though, end up staying in Brazil for a full year. However, the disease proved responsible for significant eye fatigue even with normal use, which persisted for years and returned intermittently for the rest of his life (Perry 1935, vol. 1, p. 220). In addition to the eye problems, insomnia, digestive difficulties, and back trouble made for a protracted period of ill health, from 1867–1873, during which James made recuperative visits to Germany and Italy (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 672; Barnard 1997, p. xiii). While he gradually improved over the subsequent five years and then had no debilitating bouts with illness for the next twenty years, all of the just-mentioned conditions save back strain did periodically afflict him. In 1898, at the age of 56, he suffered a heart attack, which weakened him for the remaining twelve years of his life (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 672).

Given James' experiences with ill health, did they contribute to his soul-sickness? In his chapter on the sick soul in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James' explicitly addresses how disease (and death) contribute to soul-sickness in contrast to the healthy-minded soul

who unreasonably brushes them off: “The fact that we *can* die, the fact that we *can* be ill at all, is what perplexes us. We need a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish” (James 1902, p. 140).

While poor physical health then contributed to James’ soul-sickness, his mental health figured even more prominently, especially his proneness to melancholy and depression. Indeed, the two interacted: Perry notes that James harbored “tendencies of hypochondria” (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 681), as his “neurasthenia” led him “to exaggerate his illness” (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 673). Howard Feinstein, a psychiatrist biographer of James, for his part suggests psychosomatic causes for much of James’ physical illness (Feinstein 1984, p. 89ff). Feinstein locates the root cause of James’ psychological struggles in his relationship with his father, who wanted William to lead a scientific career, despite James’ artistic and philosophical interests (Feinstein 1984, p. 117ff). Feinstein notes the commonness of “neurasthenia” (no longer regarded as a valid medical diagnosis) in James’ family and in the wider society of the time, understood as fatigue caused by exhaustion of the nervous system (Feinstein 1984, pp. 183–84).

James’ worst extended bout with depression occurred upon his return from studies in Germany and lasted around five years, during 1868–1874 (Morris 1950, p. 56; Barnard 1997, p. xiii; Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 673). Less severe depression periodically beset James for the remainder of his life. A letter to a friend indicates that James felt suicidal as early as 1866 (Strout 1970, p. 495). For a time in 1870, James seriously contemplated suicide.

At this point, I will document James’ struggle with the issue of suicide, both personally and from his philosophical perspectives over time. In the depths of this depression of 1870, James came to feel that suicide constituted “the only action available to the impotent will” (Lewis 1991, p. 205). His coming out of that depression correlated with a change of opinion concerning free will (the extent of a causal connection of course is debatable). Upon reading the neo-Kantian French philosopher Charles Renouvier, James agreed that humans do indeed have some freedom to choose which thoughts to entertain and which beliefs to hold. As he wrote in his diary, “My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will” (Myers 1986, p. 46). And with this decision he understood himself as having made the choice not to commit suicide. While never abandoning his confidence in the potential efficacy of free choice and action—a key component of his later pragmatism, James did come to a more complex view about suicide over the years. In “Is Life Worth Living?”, first delivered as a speech in 1895, James takes seriously and sympathetically those whom temperament and circumstance push toward suicide:

That life is *not* worth living the whole army of suicides declare—an army whose roll-call, like the famous evening gun of the British army, follows the sun round the world and never terminates. We, too, as we sit here in our comfort must ‘ponder these things’ also, for we are of one substance with these suicides, and their life is the life we share. The plainest intellectual integrity—nay more, the simplest manliness and honor, forbid us to forget their case. (James 1956, p. 37)

In an 1896 letter, James responded to a letter from Paul Blood, wherein Blood related his own pondering of the advantages of suicide, after having perused James’ “Is Life Worth Living?”. In that response James ventured, “I take it that no man is educated who has never dallied with the thought of suicide” (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 231). The Blood letter frames suicide more as an intellectual issue rather than as something he felt some compulsion to attempt. And James certainly recognized the negativities of life that can raise the question of suicide on the intellectual level. Indeed, in “Is Life Worth Living?”, James distinguishes between suicide as “the result of insanity or sudden frenzied impulse” and the pessimism that can result from philosophical and religious reflection on the negativities of life (James 1956, pp. 38–41). In this same letter to Blood, James regards suicide as resulting from “fear of life”. He then goes on to claim that impulse, but not reason, can overcome such fear (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 231). His own periodic bouts with depression—and a sense of regeneration coming from outside himself, more about which I will write later—led James

to the conclusion that one's own free resolve was just one factor in cases of depression and suicide.

Another important piece of evidence supporting James as a religious sick soul comes from an example he offers in the sick-soul chapter of *Varieties*, the sole example of what he labels "the worst form of melancholy, which takes the form of panic fear" (James 1902, pp. 159–60). While he attributes the experience to a Frenchman, a letter to Frank Abauzit, the French translator of *Varieties*, confirms the autobiographical nature of James' report (Richardson 2006, p. 572, n. 2): "suddenly there fell upon me without any warning, just as if it came out of the darkness, a horrible fear of my own existence" (James 1902, p. 160). Then, with the image of a pathetic epileptic patient in his mind, he "became a mass of quivering fear" at the thought that he could easily become like that person. He continues, "After this the universe was changed for me altogether. I awoke morning after morning with a horrible dread at the pit of my stomach, and with a sense of the insecurity of life that I never knew before, and that I have never felt since" (James 1902, p. 160). The writer, whom we know to be James, concludes: "I have always thought that this experience of melancholia of mine had a religious bearing" (James 1902, p. 161).

Lewis has noted James' self-proclaimed tendencies towards passivity and spectatorship (Lewis 1991, pp. 205–6), as in James' above comment upon his setback in Brazil. Indeed, in the depths of his worst depression, James unsurprisingly wallowed in passivity. His decision on free will mentioned just above represented a commitment to action. But in the background of this decision, I suspect, lay a proclivity to action and creativity, which ran deep in James' temperament and personality. Indeed, I will just below argue from his observations of human volatility and of his own great impatience, as well as from the record of his life, that James had manic tendencies as well. In using the term "tendencies", I acknowledge that I am not in a position historically or professionally to make a clinical diagnosis of bipolar disorder. I will comment that I have my own mood swings—sometimes feeling happy, enthusiastic, confident, other times feeling somewhat "down", blasé, or discouraged. And I think it is uncontroversial to add that most people recognize such swings in themselves. I believe I stand on safe ground in claiming that James had more frequent and wider mood swings than the average person. Interestingly, a letter by James from his first semester as a Harvard undergraduate, depicts himself as "surging between elation when a letter arrived from home and gloom when the mailbox was empty" (Feinstein 1984, p. 156).

What then supports my claim that James' pattern of action manifests manic tendencies? First of all, apart from those times that depression hampered him, James was a hard worker, throwing himself into his projects, often over-working himself given his various ailments—and, as Perry observes, James' overwork contributed to some of these ailments (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 672). He wrote and lectured prolifically. At the same time, after laboring hard on an endeavor for a while, he became bored and looked for the next adventure to throw himself into. James once penned, "My *flux*-philosophy may well have to do with my extremely impatient temperament. I am a motor, need change, and get very quickly bored" (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 677). Looking at his writing quantitatively, book-length manuscripts pale before the multitude of articles and mini-books. His frequent travels abroad and stateside constitute another manifestation of this need for change and novel action to ward off boredom. So does his aversion to proofreading after finishing an article, lecture, or book (Perry 1935, vol. 2, pp. 677–78). Moreover, his career path suggests his roving eye for the next project to seize upon, even with the concession that his scientific endeavors stemmed from trying to please his father rather than himself: from medicine to teaching physiology to psychology to philosophy. Some of his observations about the volatility of human nature also invite the interpretation that James projects some of his own character into his generalizations. In addition to those temperamental optimists and pessimists, James recognizes something of himself as he describes "what is called 'circular insanity'", where "phases of melancholy succeed phases of mania, with no outward cause which we can discover; and often enough to one and the same well person life will

present incarnate radiance to-day and incarnate dreariness to-morrow" (James 1956, p. 34). Also, in his chapter, "The Divided Self", in *Varieties*, James distinguishes two types of people: those "born with an inner constitution which is harmonious and well-balanced" and those with inconsistent or discordant personalities, this latter group varying from modest inconsistency to a "heterogeneity" that makes their existence "little more than a series of zigzags, as now one tendency and now another gets the upper hand" (James 1902, pp. 168–69). Finally, Myers marvels at the prodigious quantity of writing over the last ten years or so of James' life, as compared with earlier decades (Myers 1986, pp. 13–15). His sense of impending mortality helped spur James on. Nevertheless, the fact that he accomplished all this with a weakened heart (today known as congestive heart disease, not to mention at least two bouts with depression) suggests to me some manic-like energy. Not only the quantity but the quality of James' work—its creativity, interdisciplinarity, and metaphorical imaginativeness—suggest possible manic tendencies. Psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison (1996) has demonstrated that the early stages of mania involve rapid thought processes and the expanding of categories beyond their normal limits.

Do James' creative and restless activity and manic tendencies, punctuated with feelings of greater or lesser melancholy, support his being a sick soul in need of healing, or do they instead represent a healthy-mindedness balancing his soul-sickness? One argument supporting soul-sickness would regard James' inordinate proclivity to boredom as an inability to sufficiently appreciate "animal", natural, and intellectual goods, losing interest long before their "freshness date" has expired. More telling, and directly drawing on James' writings, is the fact that in his chapter, "The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness" in *Varieties*, James never associates healthy-mindedness with taking action to lessen evil in the world. This should not surprise in that for James the healthy-minded minimize the reality of evil. Moreover, he indicates that rather than rule-driven moral conduct, the healthy-minded mind-cure movements of his day rely on surrender, relaxation, and passivity in the acceptance of certain ideas, such as in the power of positive thinking (James 1902, pp. 109–20).

Last but not least, some of James' philosophical and theological speculation—and struggle—indicate his soul-sickness. Cartesian anxiety often reveals itself in an attempt to find truth or meaning on one side or the other of Cartesian dualism—in either idealism or materialism. Though James' later pragmatism represented an overcoming of such dualism, he was first plagued by skepticism of a materialistic reductive sort. Indeed, thoughts that his choices and actions might stem wholly from antecedent physical conditions compounded his youthful depression (Myers 1986, p. 388). Such thoughts arose from his reading, as forms of reductive physicalism had currency among scholars of the time, as well as from his own study of physiology.

Later, James fought the idealistic horn of dualism especially in the form of a monism that compelled one to imagine that evils stemmed necessarily from the Absolute will. James never endorsed—indeed railed against—such idealism. In conjunction with his above reflections upon life's negativities, James identified a religious impulse—we might add, an impulse especially of a sick soul seeking healing—to reconcile the tension between an intuition or a hope and an observation. (1) Nature issues from a good divine source. (2) Nature is imperfect—indeed, it includes great evil (James 1956, pp. 40–44). Monism maximizes—indeed absolutizes—the first, while denying the second. James will have none of this, for him, simplistic denial of evil. Rather, to refuse the obvious, to call evil good, capitulates to evil instead of fighting it. Thus, monism "maximize(s) evil" "based on the persuasion that the evil aspects of our life are of its very essence" (James 1902, pp. 130–31). In this connection, Mark C. Taylor in his book *After God* interprets James quite differently: he identifies James' concept of healthy-minded religion with monism (Taylor 2007, p. 37). James, however, concludes that healthy-mindedness does not brook the notion of evil as finally rational, to be justified and preserved by inclusion in the divine, but rather minimizes it as something to be "negated" and hopefully "forgotten" (James 1902, pp. 132–33; see also James 1956, p. 46). Of course, for James, the healthy-minded

seriously underestimate the extent of evil. But healthy-minded religion and non-monistic religion usually do not deny evil's reality.

None of this means, though, that James did not feel the pull of monism. James held that a viable theism for his time required a strong pantheistic element—the transcendent verging on dualistic God of classical theism did not constitute a viable option. Though he opted for “pluralism” over “monism” when forced to choose, he felt a strong attraction for a very inclusive God—just as long as this divine did not envelop everything, which James believed would make it responsible for evil. Indeed, as James “look(s) back over my own experiences” related to mysticism, he exults in *Varieties*:

It is as if the opposites of the world whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity. Not only do they, as contrasted species, belong to one and the same genus, but *one of the species*, the nobler and better one, *is itself the genus*, and so soaks up and absorbs its opposite into itself. (James 1902, p. 388; cf. Barnard 1997, p. 29)

We just need to clarify that for James this divine reality does not absorb evil qua evil into itself! And, as suggested above, James shared with monists the sense that the tension between a good God as the strongest force in the world and the manifest evils of that world needed to find a resolution. Indeed, if sick souls or divided selves could not find an adequate reconciliation, twice-born healing would be impossible. Therefore, James' vehement—and I believe correct—denunciation of popular monistic philosophies of his age also manifested some internal debate, as James argued against parts of himself.

Sick souls seek a rebirth or conversion that assures them of the meaningfulness of (their) life. But James' first conversion through his acceptance of Renouvier's defense of free will was hardly a graduation into the ranks of the twice-born. Given his tendency to throw himself into work and activity, the nature of this first rebirth should not surprise us. But at this point James, in attempting to pick himself up by his moral bootstraps, strives to be a healthy-minded soul, according to Morris (58). Morris has at least one point correct: James is still far from a second birth. For James' attitude diverges from the optimism of the healthy-minded or once-born: In extreme Kantian fashion, he regards the good will as the one good reality in a world that otherwise may be mostly or entirely evil. He posits in his diary that:

A militant existence in which the ego is posited as a monad, with the *good* as its end, and the final consolation only that of irreconcilable hatred—though evil slay me, she can't subdue me, or make me worship her. The brute force is all at her command, but the final protest of my soul as she squeezes me out of existence gives me still in a certain sense the superiority (Perry 1935, vol. 1, pp. 322–23).

In the same diary entry, James raises the question of the relationship of good and evil “in the total process of the universe” (Perry 1935, vol. 1, p. 322). But, at this point, James does not harbor any strong sense of affirmation of one of the tensions that the twice-born must reconcile, namely that a good divine power stands behind nature.

Feinstein downplays the significance of James' initial encounter with Renouvier's writing, questioning whether it constituted a conversion (Feinstein 1984, pp. 307–11). Consonant with the timeline of James' youthful depression above, Feinstein is correct that this encounter with Renouvier did not result in any sudden, dramatic relief from James' physical and mental health problems. Nevertheless, I would contend that an 1873 conversation between William and his father Henry, Sr., about William's improved health, recorded by his father and cited by Feinstein, actually supports the importance of Renouvier (Feinstein 1984, p. 311). It is to the reading of Renouvier (and Wordsworth) that William credits his rejection of the notion that mental disorder is determined solely by physiological causes and the concomitant affirmation that the mind can have causal influence in its own right. As I will explicate later, his response to Renouvier has a causal connection to this rejection of physiological determinism. James' “fear of madness” based on his family's history of mental illness, as noted by Feinstein (1984, p. 304), focused and increased

James' prior fear that physiology was destiny. Feinstein reports upon the literature of James' time that stipulates that personal attitudes and moral inclinations develop not solely from momentary decisions but also from habitual actions, as moral habits form. He further observes that James knew about and endorsed that stipulation (Feinstein 1984). (Thus, neither James nor we should expect that his decisive response to Renouvier would suddenly result in a dramatic improvement in James' mental and physical health.) This acknowledgment by James, however, does not at all deny the absolute cruciality for James of the belief that free will plays some causal role in psychological states and moral attitudes and actions. And James' encounter with Renouvier represents his initial decision to believe in such a concept of free will.

Action then figures in both James' soul-sickness and his first (not fully successful) attempts to overcome it. This trope of action will ultimately play a role in James' second birth of the soul, insofar as he will sometimes cultivate mystical-type experiences and will seek out such experiences of others, as well as strive intellectually to find a religious and metaphysical outlook conducive to a second birth. Here, I will note the centrality of action for James' epistemology. James breaks from enlightenment paradigms in emphasizing that knowing is first of all and always an activity. Whatever knowledge we gain involves—perforce and rightly—our subjective orientation and our purposes. Moreover, our action factors in the creation of some of the values we come to know. Furthermore, that knowledge is action ties into another important facet of James' soul-sickness and its resolution: his empirical and experiential bent. Truth is known through experience—whether scientific, psychological, or religious.

In the above section, then, I believe I have demonstrated James' soul-sickness, scrutinizing his physical and mental health as well as his philosophical reflection stemming directly from that soul-sickness. This soul-sickness encouraged James to seek or accentuate certain types of experience.

3. Personal Experiences and the Mystical

This section explores personal experiences of James relevant to his interests in religion and in mysticism, and relevant to his hope to overcome his soul-sickness: (1) intuitions of goodness, both of particulars as well as of life as a whole, and of a good divine power as the principal source of the world; (2) experimentation with nitrous oxide—on the whole positive, encouraged by a publication by Benjamin Paul Blood—which represented experimentation with James' own states of consciousness; (3) negative religious and mystical or quasi-mystical experiences; (4) experiences of nature from childhood on, as well as a profound experience of 1898 best classified as an instance of nature mysticism; (5) experiences of resurgence, seemingly from beyond, ameliorating or ending periods of depression; and (6) several reminiscences and a dream that became notable to James late in his life.

We have seen James remark on the imperfection of nature, which is nevertheless a manifestation of the divine. After he had escaped his youthful bouts of depression, however, James did come to credit his intuitions of the overall goodness of nature. The religious imagination could sense this in particular displays:

It is the terror and beauty of phenomena, the 'promise' of the dawn and of the rainbow, the 'voice' of the thunder, the 'gentleness' of the summer rain, the 'sublimity' of the stars, and not the physical laws which these things follow, by which the religious mind still continues to be most impressed (James 1902, p. 498).

James goes on to generalize about "faith states", using the language of psychologist James Leuba. He characterizes these states as psychological and biological. He approvingly quotes Leuba: "Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse" (James 1902, p. 507). In keeping with his pragmatism, James sees value in such positive feelings or intuitions, quite apart from the question of their truth. But going further (as he leads into the previous quote), James fashions an argument that our subjective feelings (always in correlation with things in the world), as concrete instantiations of reality,

may have as much or more purchase on truth than abstract, scientific, objective thought (James 1902, pp. 497–503). Indeed, another aspect of his pragmatism supports the insight or intuition that the world is after all amenable to our subjectivity. As James puts it in “Reflex Action and Theism”:

And the miracle of miracles, a miracle not yet exhaustively cleared up by any philosophy, is that the given order lends itself to the remodeling. It shows itself plastic to many of our scientific, to many of our aesthetic, to many of our practical purposes and ends.

When the man of affairs, the artist, or the man of science fails, he is not rebutted. He tries again. He says the impressions of sense *must* give way, *must* be reduced to their desiderated form. They all postulate in the interests of their volitional nature a harmony between the latter and the nature of things (James 1956, pp. 119–20).

I will make a final point. James, of course, famously proclaims that our moral and spiritual efforts may make a difference in the fulfillment of higher purposes. At the same time, James asserts a conduciveness of the universe to our moral and religious nature:

If this be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals. But it *feels* like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears. For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted. (James 1956, p. 61)

James likewise harbored intuitions that a good God is likely behind this on-the-whole good world. While James refers to the believer in general, he surely counts himself as one in such a “question(s) as God”: “His intimate persuasion is that the odds in its favor are strong enough to warrant him in acting all along on the assumption of its truth” (James 1956, p. 95). Almost thirty years after those words from “The Sentiment of Rationality” first appeared, James indicates that the evidence from several fields, while not yet conclusive—still more or less in the realm of intimation and intuition, leans towards belief in the divine, now as a wider consciousness containing our own experiences: “Not only psychic research, but metaphysical philosophy, and speculative biology are led in their own ways to look with favor on some such ‘panpsychic’ view of the universe as this” (James [1911] 1941, p. 204).

In 1874, Benjamin Paul Blood self-published the pamphlet *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*, wherein he reported his experience with nitrous oxide and his interpretation thereof—the substance recently having gained popularity for patients undergoing dental surgery. Intrigued, James penned a review for the *Atlantic Monthly* later that year (James 1874). The allure lingered and James in the early 1880’s engaged in his own experimentation with nitrous oxide. In the *Atlantic* piece, James had compared Blood’s “mystical” experience unfavorably “with the intoxication of moral volition”. But his own use led him to a more nuanced and, in important respects, a more positive view. In *Varieties*, James contrasts “public opinion” regarding “intoxicants and anaesthetics” with “private practice and certain lyric strains of poetry [that] seem still to bear witness to its ideality” (James 1902, pp. 386–87). James then highlights “especially nitrous oxide, when sufficiently diluted with air, [as] stimulat(ing) the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree” (James 1902, p. 387). Referring to these experiments, James relates that they convinced him that “rational” or “ordinary” consciousness constituted just one form of consciousness—and by implication reality. Thus, nitrous oxide anaesthetization served as a gateway to, or even as a type of, mystical experience.

On the other hand, James underwent negative experiences with nitrous oxide as well (cf. Barnard 1997, pp. 26–28). He expounds upon this in an extended “Note” at the end of “On Some Hegelianisms”, originally published in *Mind* in April 1882. Such negative effects occurred with “prolonged” inhalation (James 1956, p. 298). (From James’ above remark in *Varieties*, one can surmise that the effect would come more quickly with nitrous oxide insufficiently diluted with air.) Besides “incipient nausea”, such overdosing brought

an “instantaneous revulsion of mood from rapture to horror”, which James characterizes as, “perhaps, the strongest emotion I have ever experienced”. This entailed “a pessimistic fatalism, depth within depth of impotence and indifference, reason and silliness united in the fact that whichever you choose it is all one” (James 1956, pp. 297–98). What repulsed James most was exactly what he disliked about monism: that snowstorm that makes all cows white, that which denatures all finite particularities (including as we have seen evil, whitewashing it as good). This left James with “the sense of a dreadful and ineluctable fate, with whose magnitude every finite effort is incommensurable and in the light of which whatever happens is indifferent” (James 1956, p. 297). James’ “Note” scandalized some philosophers (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 674) by analogizing “both the strength and weakness of Hegel’s philosophy” (James 1956, p. 294) to the ups and downs of a drug-induced state of alternative consciousness: first the rapturous feeling of unity and reconciliation, then the dismissive realization of a horrifying indifferentism. (In *Varieties*, James appears more charitable towards Hegel vis-à-vis mystical-type experiences: Addressing the feeling of reconciliation, he pens, “I feel as if it must mean something, something like what the hegelian philosophy means, if one could only lay hold of it more clearly” (James 1902, p. 388).) We can discern an interesting parallel between the negative side of nitrous oxide intoxication and the negative side of the “equanimity” or “tranquil-mindedness” that accompanies “saintliness” (often with religious experience in the background), as described in *Varieties* (James 1902, pp. 284–85): In those of a more pessimistic nature, it takes the form “more of resignation and submission” rather than “joyous consent”. Such “self-surrendering submissiveness” in its own way devalues finite particularity—in this case that of the self. Not surprisingly James finds “something pathetic and fatalistic about this” (James 1902, pp. 285–86).

Thus, James recognizes negative aspects of drug-induced and even religious mystical states. While he does observe in *Varieties* that persons open to mystical states of consciousness often are also vulnerable to pathological states, indeed, that the combination of “superior intellect and a psychopathic temperament” best conduces to religious genius (James 1902, pp. 22–25), he forges a typological distinction between “religious” and “*diabolical*” mysticism (James 1902, p. 426). These latter states typical of mental illness—involving pessimism, desolation, and dread—share with positive mystical experiences the same site of origin, namely the subliminal, according to James (1902, p. 426). James’ melancholic experience described earlier, attributed to a Frenchman, can be classified under the diabolical type. I would draw the following conclusions about the significance of these negative mystical-like experiences for James: (1) They contribute to the purported evidence for states of consciousness other than the ordinary states, states which provide some basis for belief in extraordinary realities (James 1902, p. 427). (2) Such negative experiences testify to the depth of evil and drive sick souls, like James, to seek a second birth.

In *Varieties*, James intones that “certain aspects of nature seem to have a peculiar power of awakening mystical moods” (James 1902, p. 394). He enjoyed trips to woods and ocean as a child. Several of his letters as a young adult reveal a deep appreciation of nature (Perry 1935, vol. 1, pp. 220–21, 242, 327), including some that proclaim the spiritual salubrity of experiencing nature, as in the following: “It takes all the wrinkles and puckers out of you and washes you whole again, filling you with courage, and independence of what may happen in the future” (Perry 1935, vol. 1, pp. 348–49; see also vol. 1, p. 350). James’ own mystical-type experience of nature occurred many years later, in 1898, in the Adirondack Mountains. In a letter to his wife Alice, he highlights its noetic and even more its ineffable aspect (cf. Barnard 1997, p. 20):

I spent a good deal of it in the woods, where the streaming moonlight lit up things in a magical checkered play, and it seemed as if the Gods of all the nature-mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life. The intense significance of some sort, of the whole scene, if one could only *tell* the significance. It was one of the happiest lonesome nights of my existence, and I understand now what a poet is. He is a person who can feel

the immense complexity of influences that I felt, and make some partial tracks in them for verbal statement. In point of fact I can't find a single word for all that significance. (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 676)

Notably, James finishes this report with a reference to his upcoming Gifford Lectures (published as *Varieties*): "Doubtless in more ways than one, though, things in the Edinburgh lectures will be traceable to [this experience]" (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 676). Additionally, Barnard mentions that James, in his *Talk to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, recommends immersion in nature on the level of pure sense experience, in order that one might receive a reinvigorating mystical (like) experience, when life has lost its zest (Barnard 1997, p. 74).

A feeling of resurgence, not under one's control—in that James attributed this at least partially to the realm of the subliminal—constituted another type of experience related to mysticism. Myers in particular accentuates the nature and importance of such for James personally, describing these feelings as "regenerative experiences in which a sudden, surprising resurgence of energy occurred in the midst of a pathological apathy or *anhedonia* so pervasive that he felt that life was worthless. To regain one's energy in such circumstance is like gift from heaven, James felt" (Myers 1986, p. 472). Indeed, James devoted an article to this topic, entitled "The Energies of Men", published originally in *Philosophical Review* in 1907. In that work, James analyzes the phenomenon as far as he can both physiologically and mentally (James [1911] 1941, pp. 229–61). Finally, James turns his attention to prayer, commenting on the skepticism of most medical and scientific minds: "Few can carry on any living commerce with 'God'" (James [1911] 1941, pp. 261–62). He finishes, "Part of the imperfect vitality under which we labor can thus be easily explained. One part of our mind dams up—even *damns* up!—the other parts" (James [1911] 1941, p. 262).

Finally, I examine three reminiscences and a dream—or a series or concatenation of dreams—from late in his life, during 1906, which James believed connected him to a larger field of consciousness via the subconscious. James describes the characteristics shared by the three reminiscences in "A Suggestion about Mysticism", originally published in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1910:

What happened each time was that I seemed all at once to be reminded of a past experience; and this reminiscence, ere I could conceive or name it distinctly, developed into something further that belonged with it, this in turn into something further still, and so on, until the process faded out. There was a strongly exciting sense that my knowledge of past (and present?) reality was enlarging pulse by pulse, but so rapidly that my intellectual processes could not keep up the pace. The feeling—I won't call it belief—that I had had a sudden *opening*, had seen through a window, as it were, distant realities that incomprehensibly belonged with my own life, was so acute I cannot shake it off to-day. (James 1920, pp. 504–5)

Barnard correctly observes that the experiences related in "A Suggestion" are personal rather than transpersonal in content (Barnard 1997, p. 65)—at least the three reminiscences, I would add. Yet the rapid expansion of his field of consciousness courtesy of the subliminal tremendously impressed James, so much that it held for him evidential implications that the subconscious could indeed open up to divine consciousness(es) for some persons at some times.

James labeled the fourth "the most intensely peculiar experience of my whole life" (James 1920, p. 506). A dream—or better a concatenation of three dreams which mysteriously came together—engendered great confusion and then fear in James. While distinct in content and emotion, all three seemed equally "close" to him. He began to ask himself questions, notably: "*am I getting into other people's dreams?* Is this a 'telepathic' experience? Or an invasion of double (or treble) personality?" The upshot: James felt himself losing his sense of self (James 1920, pp. 507–8). In a striking image from what turned out to be his final piece on religious experience, James referred to a "mother-sea or reservoir" of "cosmic consciousness" (James [1911] 1941, p. 204). But ironically at this moment James cried inwardly,

“WHOSE [dreams]? Unless I can *attach* them, I am swept out to sea with no horizon and no bond, getting *lost*” (James 1920, p. 508). As I read James (cf. Barnard 1997, p. 66), what first brought some relief—which should not surprise us—was moral reflection, specifically, sympathizing with those “persons passing into dementia” or disassociation (James 1920, pp. 508–9). Yet he still felt concern that, should he fall back asleep, the confusion, fear, and lostness might return and even “develop farther” (James 1920, p. 509). Only when he convinced himself—for the moment—that the two intruding dreams had come from “*the midnight stratum of my past*” dreams, did James find the “great relief” that allowed him to drift back to sleep (James 1920, pp. 509–10). Shortly before awakening the next morning, he did have a concatenation of two dreams, but it brought only “a curious, but not alarming, confusion”—after which he had no more such unusual dream experiences (James 1920, p. 510). Despite the obvious negative emotions associated with this fourth occurrence, James chooses to emphasize the positive: “the sense that *reality was being uncovered* was mystical to the highest degree”. James proceeds immediately to end his ruminations on this particular, peculiar experience: “To this day I feel that those extra dreams were dreamed in reality, but when, where, and by whom, I can not guess” (James 1920, p. 511). I interpret this to mean that, for James, the prospect that he had through his subconscious tapped into another’s subconscious represented a very live possibility. And even if that explanation were incorrect, James still stood amazed at what he took as the ability of the subliminal to uncover extraordinary levels of reality.

We would expect that all of these above experiences of James with religious dimensions or implications would prove significant for his spiritual journey and its quest to conquer soul-sickness. As a pragmatist and empiricist, the religious or quasi-religious experiences of others would also naturally draw the attention of William James. Indeed, such experiences of others may have opened James up to some of his own experiences we have just discussed. Before mentioning some influential experiences of others, I will offer a word on James’ ambivalent comments regarding his own (in)ability to have mystical experiences. In *Varieties*, James introduces the lectures on “Mysticism” by confessing that “my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand” (James 1902, p. 379). In a letter to James Leuba, a denier of the validity of mystical experiences, James expands upon this disclaimer:

I have no living sense of commerce with a God. I envy those who have, for I know that the addition of such a sense would help me greatly. The Divine, for my active life, is limited to impersonal and abstract concepts which, as ideals, interest and determine me, but do so but faintly in comparison with what a feeling of God might effect, if I had one. (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 350)

These statements tend to mislead the reader, given that both date from after his 1898 experience that can count as an instance as nature mysticism, concerning which he does allude to divine power(s). James does qualify the first disclaimer with “almost”, so I will not accuse him of uttering an untruth. As Barnard declares in connection with the “Walpurgis Nacht” nature experience, “James did not consider himself a ‘professional mystic’” (Barnard 1997, p. 21; James coined the latter phrase in his introductory remarks on mysticism (James 1902, p. 382)). Thus, he did not have ongoing mystical experiences nor did this particular experience—though he connected it to divine powers—count for James as certain knowledge of the reality of the divine.

James came to accredit the religious and paranormal experiences of various others. In *Varieties*, he often speaks of “religious mysticism”. While James stresses the diversity of religious mystical experiences, in the sense that mystics understand quite variously the nature of the divine they claim to encounter (James 1902, pp. 424–26), he personally believes that these experiences in the mode of “direct perceptions” (James 1902, pp. 423–24) likely do connect with the divine through the subconscious. In addition, James refers to automatisms in Frederic Myers’ general sense. These include motor automatisms, glossolalia, “automatic or semi-automatic composition” or speaking under some compulsion, as with the Hebrew prophets, visions, voices, and “rapt conditions” (James 1902, pp. 234, 478–83). In and of

themselves, automatisms “undoubtedly have no spiritual significance”, according to James. He utters this verdict: “On the whole, unconsciousness, convulsions, visions, involuntary vocal utterances, and suffocation, must simply be ascribed to the subject’s having a large subliminal region, involving nervous instability” (James 1902, p. 251). Yet notice the qualifier “on the whole”. James goes on to observe that religious mystics often have also experienced automatisms (James 1902, p. 478). Thus, automatisms may accompany mystical experiences even if they are not themselves direct perceptions of the divine. Furthermore, I sense that James was quite open to the possibility—even probability—that some automatisms or “semi-automatisms”, particularly certain of those entailing religious intellectual content, issued from a direct connection with the divine (see, for example, James 1902, p. 484).

James virtually avoided in *Varieties* any references to what might today be termed the “paranormal”, only briefly mentioning—in the conditional—“supra-normal cognitions” or the “telepathic” as possible expressions of the subliminal (James 1902, p. 484). However, James belonged to the Society for Psychical Research, indeed helped found the American branch of the Society, and lectured and wrote extensively on the subject. I will turn mostly to his last ruminations on the subject, originally published in October 1909, in the *American Magazine* as “Confidences of a Psychical Researcher”, and later included in an anthology under the title “Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher” (James [1911] 1941, pp. 173–226). In this article, he briefly weighs in on “physical phenomena” or what we today call “psychokinesis”. He judges that “even here the balance of testimony seems slowly to be inclining” in their favor (James [1911] 1941, pp. 176–78; see also pp. 197–98), in contrast to his earlier judgment that the case for physical mediumship had “fared hard”. He had offered that negative evaluation in an article entitled, “What Psychical Research Has Accomplished” (James 1960, pp. 36–37)—a portion of which was originally published almost twenty years earlier, with the final form being published in 1897 (James 1960, p. 25, n. 1).

Despite his nods to such alleged physical movements, James regards them as a “particularly crass and low type of supernatural phenomena” (James [1911] 1941, p. 178). What truly fascinates and exercises him is “supernormal” cognition or knowledge, as possessed by professional mediums and others with some form of clairvoyance. James had an intermittent professional (and at least at the time of the death of an infant son, personal) relationship with Boston medium Lenora Piper lasting well over twenty years, beginning in 1885 (see Barnard 1997, pp. 51–59). He (and other members of the Society for Psychical Research) worked extensively with her when one of their own, Richard Hodgson, died in 1905. James authored their conclusions in a lengthy report to the SPR delivered in 1909 (Barnard 1997, p. 56). James discounted any full-fledged spiritist theory wherein a deceased spirit takes the initiative to communicate directly with a medium. Information conveyed by mediums entailed too much triviality, vagueness, and inaccuracy to support such a theory in James’ view. (Of course, James also believed that many or most mediums were partially or totally fraudulent, but James was convinced that Mrs. Piper was a “white crow” devoid of any intent to deceive.) Nevertheless, James had determined that mediums and clairvoyants had revealed far too many truths inexplicable in terms of ordinary cognition (James [1911] 1941, pp. 183–201). As Barnard emphasizes, already in 1896 with his essay “Psychical Research” (Barnard 1997, p. 49), James asserts: “In point of fact, the concrete evidence for most of the ‘psychic’ phenomena under discussion is good enough to hang a man twenty times over” (James 1986, p. 140). What then could explain such supra-normal knowledge? For James telepathy or thought-transference provided an adequate explanation. Perhaps the spirits of human persons lived on and/or transpersonal super-human, yet less than divine, powers collected their memories—and clairvoyants tapped into such consciousnesses. As to this “cosmic environment of *other consciousness* of some sort”, James pleads ignorance about its organization, the interrelationships of different constituent consciousnesses, and its possible relationship to matter (James [1911] 1941, pp. 201–6). Still, “one fixed conclusion dogmatically emerges” for James, namely, that there exists “a continuum of cosmic consciousness into which our several minds plunge as into a

mother-sea or reservoir" (James [1911] 1941, p. 204). Similarly, in a letter to Henry Rankin, he again refers to this "mother sea": "We are thus made convincingly aware of the presence of a sphere of life larger and more powerful than our usual consciousness, with which the latter is nevertheless continuous. Religion in this way is absolutely indestructible" (Richardson 2006, p. 406). While James never denied that the future might ultimately prove him wrong regarding its noetic status (James 1920, p. 513), I conclude that James felt as certain of the existence of this wider ocean of consciousness as anyone could, short of having had a clairvoyant or indubitable mystical experience himself.

4. Overbeliefs Close to Experience

James also recognizes the need for interpretations beyond more or less immediate perceptions and intuitions, that is, the inevitability of "overbeliefs". Given his empirical bent, we would expect James to harness not only his own and others' experiences in support of the reality of wider consciousnesses, including that of the divine, but also philosophical analysis and theorizing that attempt to stay close to experience (I say "attempt", and in this article I will not pass any ultimate judgments on whether James succeeds in such attempts). Indeed, for the empiricist James, the very function or purpose of philosophy is to restore the fluency of immediate experience. Conceptual thought recognizes—and sometimes creates—problems in and among immediate experiences. Good philosophy strives to bring us back to the smooth flow of immediate experience (see, e.g., "The Sentiment of Rationality" (James 1956, pp. 63–110), a compilation of material originally from 1879–80; "The Thing and Its Relations" (James [1912] 2003, p. 48)). I discern four philosophical themes, interconnected in various ways, that helped James to recover the flow of experience—and to become twice-born: (1) his concept of "pure experience", (2) the alleged perceptual nature of religious and other supranormal experience, (3) the judgment that all we experience, both the natural and the "supernatural", falls within the same "realm" of existence, and (4) the judgment or assumption that experience entails an irreducible plurality—and temporality, yet at the same time a degree of unity that allows for manifold continuities, interconnections, and confluences—among them, the compounding of human and divine consciousnesses. All of these overbeliefs support the possibility or probability of religious experience.

In *Principles of Psychology* from 1890, James' analysis of the flux and flow of consciousness depicts an integration of what is in our field of consciousness, yet with indefinite or fuzzy boundaries (James 1890). Still, even in immediate sense experience, a distinction between subject and object obtains at this point in James' intellectual journey. Though he was quite open to our becoming aware of supranormal realities at the subliminal margins of our normal field of consciousness, this nevertheless meant an awareness of these realities only as external objects. Though our consciousness might be similar in kind to supranormal consciousnesses, James denied any possibility of overlapping, compounding, or enveloping of consciousness. However, with his program of "radical empiricism", James grows more radical on these issues. Significantly, he articulates a concept of "pure experience", a concept both psychological and metaphysical. While his earlier understanding of immediate sense experience involved some distinction between subject and object, pure experience occurs prior to any differentiation into subject and object, into mental and physical. This concept thus constitutes one of the ways, the most radical, whereby James attempts to overcome Cartesian dualism. When we retrospect on experience, we invariably differentiate between subject and object. As I interpret James, we normally make impure an instant of pure experience by mixing in concepts and categories, even if relatively pre-reflective or low-level ones (cf. Barnard 1997, p. 142; Ford 1982, pp. 78–85). As James puts it, "Only new-born babes, or men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*, tho ready to be all sorts of *whats*" (James [1912] 2003, p. 49). (An irony pertains here: pure experience remains inaccessible to "experience" in the everyday sense of the word; it appears to be subliminal to our ordinary consciousness.) Metaphysically, pure experience serves as the "primal stuff" of all realities (James [1912] 2003, pp. 2–3), holding the potential

to be differentiated and contextualized into various subjective and objective, mental and physical, realities. I deliberately chose the word “realities”, because pure experiences are particular and plural, despite a relative formlessness. In other words, Jamesian pure experience should in no way be confused with a monistic universal consciousness, absolutely formless, prior to all particularities.

What relation does James’ late positing of pure experience have to his accrediting mystical and paranormal experiences? Obviously, the concept of pure experience entails a blurring—indeed in the initial moment an absence—of the distinction between subject and object. Moreover, James’ interpretation of mystical and paranormal experience, while eschewing any ultimate pure consciousness that transcends all particularity, does involve the presence of another consciousness’ contents within that of the experiencer. As Myers observes, in 1895 James already had abandoned his position from *Principles* of the discrete and indivisible nature of the contents of consciousness in each instantiation. In “The Knowing of Things Together”, James heralded his conversion to the notion of the compounding of states of consciousness (Myers 1986, p. 333). That everything at the most primal level consists of pure experience has obvious enough implications that support the possibility of the compounding of consciousness, including compounding of our states with those of superhuman realities. At the level of pure experience, overlapping continually occurs in ordinary reality as we engage the world with other persons. While our practical need to survive and desire to thrive in the everyday world normally block any awareness of larger consciousnesses, in theory pure experience removes any insurmountable obstacle to our becoming aware of a wider consciousness.

Nevertheless, commentators Morris and Myers disagree on how explicitly James himself connected his concept of pure experience with his treatment of religious experience. For his part, Morris opines that James left the connection implicit: “As a datum, or ultimate fact, the mystical state of communion with God and participation in His life should, philosophically, have been assimilated to that ‘pure experience’ which James postulated as the primary stuff of being. But, leaving his metaphysics incomplete, he did not work out this problem” (Morris 1950, p. 67). Myers, on the other hand, states that James’ belief in the divine as part of “the *more* that surrounds each experience was connected not only to the subconscious but also to the concept of pure experience as presented in *A Pluralistic Universe*” (Myers 1986, p. 473). Myers proceeds to explicate the subliminal “more” precisely in terms of pure experience (Myers 1986, pp. 473–74), even though the term “pure experience” itself does not appear in *Universe*. James does, however, expound upon immediate experience sans conceptualization, then continues: “And just as we are co-conscious with our own momentary margin, may not we ourselves form the margin of some more really central self in things which is co-conscious with the whole of us?” (James 1909, pp. 277–90). Moreover, James does here refer to his program as “radical empiricism”, while the collection published as *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, published posthumously according to James’ intentions, centers on the notion of pure experience (James [1912] 2003). Crucially, James delineates in *Universe* his conclusions regarding the entailments of one’s position on the compounding of consciousnesses vis-à-vis one’s concept of the nature of divinity: (1) rejection of compounding meant one must hold to a traditional theistic model wherein we are external to God and God is external to us; (2) acceptance of compounding allowed for a more pantheistic understanding wherein intimacy of human and divine consciousness is possible (James 1909, p. 193ff, 205ff). Thus, James’ attraction to a more inclusive model for human–divine interrelationships constituted one motivation for his reconsideration of his position against compounding. Yet acceptance of compounding does not seem in itself to compel a doctrine of pure experience. (As suggested above, James’ desire to overcome Cartesian dualism could provide motivation for developing his theory of pure experience.) Conversely, though, the concept of pure experience does make it easier to advance the notion of the compounding of different individual consciousnesses (as opposed to merely maintaining the compound nature of consciousness within each individual). That is, we do not have to worry about the messiness of dealing with any unalterable distinction

between consciousness and material objects as we try to put two or more consciousnesses together, since all reality at its most basic level consists of pure experience. Thus, I would claim that one motivation for James' formulation of his metaphysics of pure experience was precisely his desire to support the compounding of our consciousness with higher consciousnesses. Interestingly, in "Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher", after portraying all minds as included in the mother sea of cosmic consciousness, he refers to his metaphysics as "some such 'panpsychic' view of the universe as this" (James [1911] 1941, p. 204).¹ Since neither that article nor *Universe* directly mentions "pure experience" in relation to mystical experience, one might pronounce Morris technically correct in saying James' left matters implicit and insufficiently developed. Yet, in his own way, James does strongly forge the linkage. Frankly, I do not fathom what "problem" Morris believes James failed to "work out" in that regard. While James, as mentioned above, confesses his ignorance respecting the particular levels of superhuman consciousnesses and their organization—a problem he hopes will one day find its resolution through empirical methods (James [1911] 1941, pp. 205–6), I see no theoretical problem as to how higher and lower levels of pure experience might compound. That is, if one grants the metaphysical theory of pure experience in the first place, James had no need to do further work to assimilate it to mystical experiences of the divine.

Holding to the perceptual nature of religious and other paranormal experiences represents another way that James offers philosophical support while attempting to stay close to experience. Especially for the benefit of those who have not had a full-blown mystical experience, James advocates for the plausibility of mystical perception through its similarity to, its continuity with, ordinary perception. The just-discussed concept of pure experience could complicate the analysis of ordinary perception and perhaps of supernatural perception. Yet it need not do so. The bottom line is this: for James, all individual experiences—in that they involve a perceptual element of particular content, with both a subjective and objective dimension—possess some difference, some distinction, from the experiences of every other individual, despite some overlapping or confluence. James' construal of mystical experience then does not permit the absolute loss or disappearance of the self in the divine, whereby one becomes identical with divinity beyond all particularity, beyond any and all senses of subjectivity and objectivity. He insists on an inalienable integrity and distinctiveness of the human person, even as it might compound with a divine consciousness. In such compounding, James does not allow that humans can ever know distinctly all the particularity that the inclusive divine consciousness perceives. Sometimes a particular perception, presumably included in some way in a superhuman and/or divine consciousness, may come through to a clairvoyant or a prophet. Nevertheless, for James, the religious mystical perception typically is of a "more" or "muchness" with fuzzy rather than clear and distinct contents.

Maintaining that the natural and "supernatural" comprise finally not two, but one, realm of experience permitted James to support the primacy of experience—and to do so in a way that upheld the plausibility of religious and paranormal experiences. Indeed, James concluded that the "foreignness" of an external, dualistic God or of an absolute monistic divine precluded commerce with either: with the former due to its atemporality, self-sufficiency (James 1909, pp. 24–30), and bodilessness (James 1909, p. 150); with the latter due to its own atemporality and impassible completeness (James 1909, pp. 39–40, 318–19) as well as to the lack of any autonomy or freedom for humans—and God—to affect future contingencies (as everything happens—or has eternally happened!—as it must in such a block-universe) (James 1909, pp. 310–11, 320–24). Moreover, any "universalistic" or "refined" supernaturalism where "God's existence" has "no consequence for particulars" fails to meet a "legitimate requirement" of religion (James 1902, pp. 520–23). As Perry notes, already in 1888, James had found attractive Edmund Gurney's "hypothetical supernaturalism", positing an "invisible order continuous with the present order of nature" (Perry 1935, vol. 2, p. 334). For James, the continuity of this type of supernaturalism, which he labels as "crass" or "piecemeal" in *Varieties* (James 1902, pp. 520–23), allows us to experience

God and allows the divine to have particular effects in the world, but in a manner not contradictory to the processes of nature discernible by science. Through the subliminal, James believed that renewing energies come (often with no conscious awareness of a superhuman or divine source), as do religious mystical experiences wherein renewing energies and confidence become conscious, as well as visionary-type experiences by clairvoyants and perhaps by religious geniuses.

Finally, James inducts, especially from more or less immediate experience, that experience and reality involve an irreducible plurality, diversity, and crucially temporality, while at the same time manifesting various unities—some given, some in the making. Of course, the compounding of human and superhuman consciousness counts as one of those unities or continuities for James. In *Universe* (James 1909, pp. 79, 256–57), and at more length in a late article published posthumously, “The One and the Many”, James campaigns for pluralism over against his favorite opponent, monistic idealism. James handicaps monism for its absolutistic stance on oneness: “The irreducible outness of *anything*, however infinitesimal, from *anything* else, in *any* respect, would be enough, if it were solidly established, to ruin the monistic doctrine” (James 1911, p. 115). Empiricism, “taking perceptual experience at its face-value” (James 1911, p. 140), provides for the solid establishment of some diversity and disconnection. By contrast, rationalistic monism only comes to its doctrine through abstract conceptualization cut off from experience. Empirical observation establishes the reality of both diversity and unity, both manyness and oneness, the precise nature of the mix established by retail rather than wholesale methods:

To sum up, the world is “one” in some respects, and “many” in others. But the respects must be distinctly specified, if either statement is to be more than the emptiest abstraction. The amount of either unity or of plurality is, in short, only a matter for observation to ascertain and write down, in statements which will have to be complicated, in spite of every effort to be concise (James 1911, pp. 133–34; see also 1909, p. 79).

5. Conclusions

Clearly pluralism as James construes it involves various and sundry connections and unities. As preceding sections of this article have suggested, James grew to endorse an “intimate”, “indwelling”, even “pantheistic” understanding of the divine, wherein human life is “part and parcel of that deep reality” (James 1909, pp. 28–30). Such a model cohered well with the unitive tendencies accompanying James’ interest and “will to believe” in religious experiences, in contrast to a more traditional model wherein God stood as simply discontinuous with the world. Of course, as above, James insists that God cannot “be the absolutely totalized all-enveloper”, lest the autonomy, distinctness, and particularities of individuals slip into the black hole of the block universe and God be “responsible for everything, including evil” (James 1909, pp. 294–95). Yet James proves willing to go quite far in his enthusiasm for divine inclusiveness. Fechner’s theory of successively enveloping consciousnesses, including an earth soul or consciousness, fascinates James, who finds it plausible (James 1909, pp. 131–77). As in “Final Impressions of a Psychical Researcher”, James will not commit to a specific configuration of superhuman consciousness(es) (James 1909, pp. 310–11). However, as inclusive of human and perhaps intermediary superhuman consciousnesses, the span of the divine consciousness is “vast” (James 1909, pp. 310–11). While James will not follow Fechner on divine all-inclusiveness—and he contends that Fechner himself demurs from making God the absolute “all-enveloper” on several counts (James 1909, pp. 294–95), he does write the following in *Radical Empiricism*: “If there be a God, he is no absolute all-experiencer, but simply the experiencer of widest actual conscious span” (James [1912] 2003, p. 102). In *Universe*, James affirms, “We are indeed internal parts of God and not external creations, on any possible reading of the panpsychic system”² (James 1909, pp. 318–19).

James’ last piece published during his lifetime, “A Pluralistic Mystic”, referring to Benjamin Paul Blood, further evidences his valorization of both pluralism and mystical

experience with its unitive tendencies. Perry recounts that James took this opportunity to trumpet his “philosophical indebtedness” to Blood, who spurred James’ own mystical experimentation, as we have seen earlier. Sensing the possible imminence of his own death before Blood might produce a synthesis of Blood’s own scattershot philosophical work, James took it upon himself to attempt the task (Perry 1935, vol. 2, pp. 658–60). James felt this indebtedness both for Blood’s philosophical ruminations, which ended up being similar to James’ emerging metaphysics—at least as interpreted by James—and for Blood’s corroboration of this metaphysics via his mystical experiences (James [1911] 1941, pp. 374–75). James quotes Blood that “Nature is contingent, excessive, and mystical essentially” (James [1911] 1941, p. 394). Invoking the theme of manyness in oneness, James interprets Blood to mean that “there is no more one all-enveloping fact than there is one all-enveloping spire in an endlessly growing spiral, and no more one all-generating fact than there is one central point in which an endlessly converging spiral ends” (James [1911] 1941, p. 404). Once again paying homage to temporality, James affirms this sentiment and these words from Blood: “There can be no purpose of eternity. It is process all. The most sublime result, if it appeared as the ultimatum, would go stale in an hour; it could not be endured” (James [1911] 1941, p. 406). James then concludes his own philosophizing with additional words from Blood; the temporal process will continue whether or not James’ subjectivity continues after his death: “There is no conclusion. What has concluded, that we might conclude in regard to it? There are no fortunes to be told, and there is no advice to be given.—Farewell!” (James [1911] 1941, p. 411).

Blood thus lent James significant help in attempting to hold together both the realism of empiricism and the tenderness of mysticism, and both his pluralistic and his unitive leanings. Assuming the correctness of my characterization of James as a “sick soul” and a “divided self”, his attempt at such a synthesis should not surprise us. It was part and parcel of his attempt to find a second birth. At bottom, the sick soul, unlike the once-born, senses the depth of evil. And twice-born religion emerges from a salvific assurance of the worthwhileness of life in the face of such evil through a link to the divine. Many in his age found their second birth in monistic idealism. However, while the more expresses itself in nature, for James this never constitutes a “perfect expression”. Neither immediate experience nor philosophical analysis can justify the mental gymnastics entailed in monistic faith that all rests in perfect harmony within the One, despite appearances, and that the Absolute appears to will particular evils. Nature is an expression of diversity-in-unity, but again never a perfect expression. Perfect harmony of each to each and within a larger whole is an ideal to strive for, not an actuality in present experience.

William James, then, advanced from a faith in moral effort alone to a twice-born faith bearing an assurance of some saving relationship vis-à-vis the divine. He had already achieved this in some form and to some degree, circa 1880 (see, for example, James 1956, pp. 95–110, 111–44 [the latter article entitled, “Reflex Action and Theism”]): he had a commitment to the existence of a good God and to a universe good on the whole, so that his basic attitude could be one of trust. At that point, however, God was rather external, too separated to fully satisfy James. After struggling for many years, particularly with the issue of the possibility of the compounding of consciousness, by 1895 he had committed himself to the notion of a more intimate divine who coinherited with us in important respects at the margins of our normal consciousness. In addition, he attempted to experience the nature of unitive states with his experimentation with consciousness-altering drugs in the early 1880’s. Finally, his own mystical-like experience of nature and then his late valorization of four reminiscences or dream experiences of “sudden uncovering”, along with his accreditation of more definitive mystical experiences of others, not the least that of Blood, brought James to a very strong twice-born faith carrying an assurance of the meaningfulness of his life. He ventured far beyond any once-born faith that failed to wrestle mightily with the metaphysical question of evil—and with the practical question of coping with formidable evil.

A positive aspect of James' treatment of mystical and other religious experiences, in my view, is that the body is always involved, whether consciously or subliminally. This contrasts with those claiming that mystical experiences and "out-of-body" experiences provide support for dualistic beliefs that the mind leaves behind any bodily awareness or feelings in these experiences (Shushan 2014, pp. 406–7; Winkelman 2018, p. 7).

Scientific knowledge today versus that available to James makes it more difficult to find evidence of direct divine causation or input in religious experiences. We now know that a pre-reflective distinction between self and other exists in early infancy (Gallagher and Meltzoff 1996). While perception is an action in relation to one's environment that specifies some indeterminacies, there is no undifferentiated reality or moment prior to the self recognizing, pre-reflectively, that it is engaging its world. Thus, the theory of pure experience fails, as does the support it might offer for a compounding of human and divine consciousnesses. Regarding subliminal perceptions: while knowledge exists about subconscious or tacit perceptions of information from one's environment, no scientific evidence points to a divine referent for these perceptions in the natural environment (or for that matter, wholly transcending nature). Thus, one might find the value of religious experiences in terms of one of James' criteria for truth—a pragmatic criterion: their beneficial or adaptive effects rather than more objective criteria.

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Notes

- ¹ In relating James' rejection of C. A. Strong's version of panpsychism, Myers asserts that James never "espous(ed)" pansychism "fully and decisively" As Myers adds, James refuses to simply identify reality as essentially "psychic" or "mental" (Myers 1986, p. 333). Such identification would discount the material, the bodily, and the objective. (James' "panpsychism" then would consist of the claim that all reality has a psychic dimension, not that every aspect of everything is psychic.) Remember James' attempts to overcome Cartesian dualism by positing pure experience as prior to differentiation into mental and physical. Nonetheless, one can make the case that the supposedly neutral primal stuff favors the mental side in the very adoption of the word "experience" to describe it. Interestingly Alfred North Whitehead praises James for inaugurating an era of post-Cartesian dualism (Whitehead 1925, pp. 143–47; cf. Morris 1950, p. 53). Whitehead for his part wants to avoid such dualism. Yet in stipulating "unit occasions of experience" as the basic metaphysical reality, he too might fall prey to the accusation of favoring the mental over the physical. Indeed, at least for James, every experience purportedly differentiates into something physical and objective. With Whitehead, however, the "physical pole" of each unit occasion consists of past occasions of experience; thus, we seem to have more unambiguously a mental or idealistic monism relative to the basic unit of reality.
- ² James then adds, "Yet because God is not the absolute, but is himself a part when the system is conceived pluralistically, his functions can be taken as not wholly dissimilar to those of the other smaller parts" (James 1909, pp. 318–19). A sense exists then in which God is "united" with us in having temporal purposes to fulfill and obstacles to overcome, precisely because the divine is not the absolute unity postulated by idealistic monism, which James regards as foreign in its eternal, impassible completeness.

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Article

Mysticism and Practical Rationality Exploring Evelyn Underhill through the Lens of Phronesis

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Abstract: This paper aims to justify that mysticism can be considered rational from the perspective of practical reason. Particularly, we will argue that mysticism embodies the oxymoron inherent in practical wisdom (phronesis), namely, an ordered openness. Our roadmap for substantiating this hypothesis is as follows: we will start by explaining that if the concept of rationality is approached in a scientific manner, then mysticism cannot be deemed rational. We will employ Kant's approach to rationality to support this assertion (2). Next, we will demonstrate that while the modern scientific approach to rationality is effective for fields of study where the subject matter typically unfolds in a regular or predictable manner, it proves insufficient in dimensions of existence that resist normative descriptions. In this section, following Aristotle and Gadamer, we will contend that theoretical reason should be complemented by practical reason, which is characterized by normative openness (3). Finally, we will argue that mysticism, although not rational from a theoretical viewpoint, is indeed rational from a practical standpoint (4). To avoid inappropriate generalizations when discussing mysticism, the third section will be centered on the work of Evelyn Underhill.

Keywords: mysticism; practical reason; ordered openness; Evelyn Underhill

“Because mystery is horrible to us, we have agreed for the most part to live in a world of labels; to make of them the current coin of experience, and ignore their merely symbolic character, the infinite gradation of values which they misrepresent. We simply do not attempt to unite with Reality”. (Underhill 1914, p. 7)

1. Introduction

The concept of mysticism is often readily dismissed in academic circles and discussions. Those who wield it in an argument are typically not taken seriously, primarily for one of two reasons. On the one hand, it is assumed that any account or reflection based on mystical experiences is associated with an organized religion. Therefore, the discourse or ideas that stem from such an endeavor would be limited by the dogmas or belief system of the religion from which it arises. In that case, the analysis and conclusions are to be considered incompatible with a rational and unbiased (scientific) scrutiny of the subject. Freud, in *The Future of an Illusion*, argues that spiritual information provided by religion is doomed to perish since “in the long run nothing can withstand reason and experience, and the contradiction which religion offers to both is all too palpable. Even purified religious ideas cannot escape this fate, so long as they try to preserve anything of the consolation of religion” (Freud 1961, p. 54). Simply put, any spiritual information that proceeds from religion is not to be trusted, as dogma sets narrow limits within which rational inquiry can unfold.

On the other hand, it is also argued that, in case these types of experiences are not accompanied or sustained by theological or philosophical discourses, the term mysticism is added to an idea or argument for the sole purpose of giving a halo of legitimacy to discourses and lines of thought that lack rigor and, ultimately, a solid foundation. It is once again Freud who warns us of this naive and dangerous positionality by pointing out that there are certain types of people, to whom he refers as *spiritualists*¹, who merely project

the content of their consciousness (including the unconscious) to worldly phenomena, and then believe that what comes from within themselves is actually *out there*. In his words,

“The proceedings of the spiritualists meet us at this point; they are convinced of the survival of the individual soul and they seek to demonstrate to us beyond doubt the truth of this one religious doctrine. Unfortunately they cannot succeed in refuting the fact that the appearance and utterances of their spirits are merely the products of their **own mental activity**. They have called up the spirits of the greatest men and of the most eminent thinkers, but all the pronouncements and information which they have received from them have been so foolish and so wretchedly meaningless that one can find nothing credible in them but the capacity of the spirits to adapt themselves to the circle of people who have conjured them up” (Freud 1961, pp. 27–28).

In other words, the fact that spiritual experiences tend to coincide with the belief systems of those who encounter them makes us suspect that they are not real phenomena, but mere projections of our naïve human mind.

This situation, at least in part, as Underhill suggests, stems from the fact that the concept of “mysticism” is “one of the most abused words in the English language. It [mysticism] has been used in different and often mutually exclusive senses by religion, poetry, and philosophy: it has been claimed as an excuse for every kind of occultism, for diluted transcendentalism, vapid symbolism, religious or aesthetic sentimentalism, and bad metaphysics” (Underhill 1911, p. x). In other words, it is the inappropriate co-opting of the mystical concept by a variety of movements, lines of thought, or mere emotionally charged descriptions of mundane events, which rightly arouse suspicion towards anything labeled *mystical*.

It is against this background that the present article aims to justify that mysticism, if authentic and not a type of pseudo-spiritualism appropriating this adjective to provide itself with a halo of legitimacy, possesses an inherent rationality. That is, under certain conditions, it would be legitimate to speak of a mystical rationality. Given the vastness of the mystical tradition—if we can indeed classify it as such—and the radical differences in how its representatives present information about the mystical way of life, we have chosen to focus primarily on one exponent of mysticism: Evelyn Underhill. Although we will make occasional references to other mystics and traditions, our main emphasis will be on Underhill’s portrayal. We will explore how, according to Underhill, authentic mysticism is far from mere trickery or ingenuity, but rather has its own distinct rationality. Specifically, we will argue that mysticism can be understood as rational from a practical standpoint, in the manner presented by Aristotle and further elaborated by Gadamer. In this context, an analysis of mysticism through the lens of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, can illuminate its meaning, which often remains obscured when approached from a limited and scientific concept of rationality.

Before we begin, it is necessary to point out that, following Underhill (Underhill 1911, p. 112), there are at least two approaches to the study of mysticism. One involves examining the conditions of possibility for the mystical experience, what Underhill refers to as the *mystic way*. The other approach attempts to decipher the content of the mystical experience itself, that is, to unravel the content of what Underhill calls the *mystic field of perception*. In this paper, we will focus on the *mystic way* and argue that it is this dimension of mysticism that engages with practical reason. A deeper exploration of the mystic field of perception, which would require delving into metaphysics, aesthetics and the effort of trying to conceptually articulate an experience that resists normative description, will be reserved for another occasion (though some remarks on this will be made).

2. The Sense in Which Mysticism Is Not Rational

In Section 126 of his *Gay Science*, Nietzsche asserts that “mystical explanations are considered deep; the truth is, they are not even shallow” (Nietzsche 2004, p. 121). That is, any narrative to which a mystical dimension is added acquires a halo of legitimacy and vast depth that it does not really deserve. It is most likely that these are, in fact, banal

and superfluous explanations which, due to their shallowness—one that does not even achieve true superficiality—do not really explain anything (presumably, because they resort to pseudo-realities that, given their “pseudoness”, do not even touch the surface of the phenomenon they purport to explain). Therefore, these narratives are often *mystified*, hence artificially raising them to a level of significance they inherently lack.

Bearing this in mind—which, regrettably, is often true—makes it challenging to see how mysticism could be considered rational. We will argue, however, that mysticism, if appropriately presented, engages in or possesses practical rationality. We contend that, as with every other domain that is part of practical rationality, mysticism can provide guidelines for the betterment of human action. Although it cannot attain the precision characteristic of mathematics, it nevertheless offers a series of guidelines. As Gadamer explains, while these standards are flexible, they establish the necessary conditions enabling individuals to form a subjective disposition that empowers them to respond appropriately to varied and constantly evolving concrete situations (Gadamer 2013, pp. 323–24). Now, before explaining how mysticism, especially that of Evelyn Underhill, can be seen as aiming at the development of practical wisdom in the individual, we will review how mysticism should not be understood as rational. For this purpose, we will use Kant’s concepts of theoretical and practical rationality and see that, if rationality is considered solely in terms of the knowledge that meets these standards, then mysticism is not rational.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant refers to theoretical rationality, which is concerned with the a priori conditions of possibility for human understanding, by stating that for something to count as knowledge (rather than mere regulative ideas)², it is essential that the information provided is systematically organized into an interconnected totality. In his words,

“Under the government of reason our cognitions cannot at all constitute a rhapsody but must constitute a system, in which alone they can support and advance its essential ends. I understand by a system, however, the unity of the manifold cognitions under one idea [. . .]. The unity of the end, to which all parts are related and in the idea of which they are also related to each other, allows the absence of any part to be noticed in our knowledge of the rest, and there can be no contingent addition or undetermined magnitude of perfection that does not have its boundaries determined a priori” (Kant 2009, pp. A 832/833, B 861).

That is, for a body of information to be considered rational and, consequently, science rather than mere opinion, it is necessary that it be hierarchically organized (from genus to species) and that it be autonomous. It must be self-sufficient, not requiring the support of other branches of knowledge. This does not mean, however, that such a system cannot grow or expand. It can do so, but always within the boundaries set by cognition itself. That is, “it can, to be sure, grow internally (*per intus suceptionem*) but not externally (*per appositionem*), like an animal body, whose growth does not add a limb but rather makes each limb stronger and fitter for its end without any alteration of proportion” (Kant 2009, pp. A 833/B 861).

In a theoretical sense, therefore, mysticism would not be considered rational according to Kant’s standards. Whereas theoretical knowledge, as depicted by the philosopher from Königsberg, seeks certain and unchanging knowledge, mysticism embraces the opposite premise: it accepts that the world and everything within it are always subject to change and aims to discern the mode(s) of life that can harmonize human existence with this ever-changing world. In other words, mysticism is founded on the notion that the human being is an *existential openness*. This implies, as Plessner aptly states, that “one becomes oneself through the performances of one’s own life. The human being is open, not pre-determined or derived from any instance, but constituted in relation to the boundaries of one’s world, the possibilities of one’s own corporeality, in relation to other people, and one’s own actions within the realm of culture in the broadest sense of the word” (Plessner 2019, p. 44). The way to engage with this dual dimension, a constantly changing world and a being (which, in each case, is ourselves) that must repeatedly define itself in the light of this ever-changing backdrop, is not, according to mysticism, by reducing what we understand

as knowledge. Rather, it is through the mastery of both domains: the linear, which is temporal, circumscribed, logical, provable, and objective; and “the nonlinear, which is influential, subjective, experiential, unrestricted, and contextual rather than provable”³. As Underhill puts it, “the greatest men, those whose consciousness is stretched to its full extent, are able to grasp, to be aware of, both. They recognize themselves as living in both the discrete, manifested, ever-changing parts and appearances, and also in the Whole Fact. They respond fully to both” (Underhill 1914, p. 39). Framed in Kantian terms, the mystic would not only have knowledge of the phenomenal (which is all that we as human beings are capable of knowing) but also of the noumenal—an unthinkable notion for Kant.

Now, read from the Kantian perspective, mysticism should not be considered rational from the standpoint of practical reason either. This is because, while practical philosophy must assume the existence of things that, if real, would belong to the noumenal realm (sc. human freedom and its exercise), it also seeks universality in its conclusions. In this regard, the philosopher from Königsberg states that “practical laws refer only to the will, without regard to what is attained by its causality, and one may abstract from this latter (as belonging to the world of sense) so as to have them pure” (Kant 1996, p. AA 5:21). In other words, the practical laws are valid *a priori*, meaning they are prior to and independent of sensory experience (world of senses)⁴.

Therefore, the universality that Kantian practical reason aspires to, which is grounded in the fact that pure reason lies at the basis of the practical use of reason (Kant 1996, p. 5:16), is incompatible with the openness, flexibility, and attentiveness to the known (perceptible) and unknown (imperceptible via the senses) of situations and contexts that mysticism advocates (this will be revisited in the following section). For Kant, an explanation of this nature (mysticism) would be merely a paralogism of reason. That is, an attempt to fill “the gaps regarding what one does not know [...] making thoughts into things and hypostatizing them” (Kant 2009, p. A 395).

In summary, mysticism would not be considered rational in the modern sense of the term—a notion we have examined through the lens of the philosopher who is the paradigm of the scientization of the humanities in modernity: Immanuel Kant. Rather, it would be situated not within the domain of knowledge, but amidst the tumultuous sea of faith (Kant 2009, pp. A 236/B 295), where ideas proliferate that, though regulative, lack an empirical correlate perceptible to the senses.

3. The Sense in Which Rationality Includes Openness

The somewhat scientific perspective presented in the previous section leads us to question whether it is correct to consider only that which can produce apodictic knowledge, i.e., that which is necessary and universally valid, as rational. It seems logical that in aspects of human existence that unveil themselves in a consistent or regular manner, the verifiability provided by the scientific method should be the standard by which certainty is gauged—or at least the closest approximation to this standard that can be achieved, as even for modern science, Kantian apodicticity is a challenging goal to attain. However, there are facets of life where such a standard is either unfeasible or may lead to adverse outcomes. For instance, consider the legal sphere: during the COVID-19 pandemic, when special permissions were required to leave one’s home, a woman who was raped and fled to report the assault to the police was fined by an officer for lacking the necessary authorization to be out on the street. Through the lens of a stringent scientific rationality, the officer’s action was technically correct—he followed the law to the letter, which stated, “anyone moving without permission should be fined”. Yet, any compassionate individual would recognize that fining someone in such distressing circumstances is not only inhumane but also fundamentally irrational⁵. This scenario begs the question of whether rationality can be conceived more broadly than previously discussed, and if mysticism might be considered rational within an expanded definition of the term. In this section, we will review the Aristotelian notion of practical rationality, as well as its reception and development by Hans-

Georg Gadamer, to then justify that an authentic mysticism could indeed be considered rational from this perspective.

While theoretical philosophy concerns itself with things that are not subject to change, Aristotle tells us, practical philosophy deals with what is contingent; that is, with what can or cannot be (Aristotle 1991a, bk. V). In particular, practical philosophy is concerned with the human being as a source of action and aims to improve it (Aristotle 1991b, bk. III–IV). It focuses its study on human action primarily for two reasons. First, because situations that call for human action are never identical. The singularities and richness of the events presented to humans are so varied that one might even dare to say they are infinite. Second, even if situations remain stable (the world unfolds in a typical or regular manner), the interference of freedom on the course of action makes it impossible to predict how the subject will act. The exceptional character of the world and human freedom thus render the human being, as a source of action, the focal point of practical philosophy—a field predominantly concerned with the contingent. Now, if we understand that rationality aims to find criteria that are universal, that is, to arrive at principles that are communicable among individuals of the human species, then the domain of practical reason, the contingency of human action in an ever-changing world, presents a problem. How to provide rules for a dimension of existence where there are no regularities? How to “tame” a world where everything is subject to change?

Aristotle addresses the inherent challenge of navigating through life’s uncertainties with the concept of *phronesis*, commonly translated as “prudence” or “practical wisdom”. This type of knowledge is distinct; it does not adhere to a strict set of unchanging rules, nor does it offer absolute clarity or uniformity in its application. Instead, it is governed by guidelines that are inherently flexible and adaptable, reflecting the nuanced and variable nature of real-world situations. In the realm of practical philosophy, Aristotle argues,

“we must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each of our statements be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs” (Aristotle 1991b, bk. I 1094b12–1094b26).

Therefore, *phronesis* is less about achieving certainty and more about cultivating sound judgment. It ties together the notions of openness, taste, tact, and common sense, suggesting that wise decision making involves a harmonious blend of these elements. This form of wisdom enables individuals to navigate complex moral landscapes with discernment and adaptability, recognizing that life’s most pressing decisions often lie in shades of grey rather than black and white.

Legal understanding, in general, and particularly the example we have already seen of the police officer fining the woman who has just escaped from her aggressor and lacks the permit to be out in the streets during the COVID-19 pandemic, once again serves to illustrate what the Stagirite is aiming at. The law, while requiring clear and precise rules that establish a minimum of predictability (we know in advance the legal consequences of our actions), must be open to the exceptional. Gadamer, appropriating Aristotelian wisdom, argues that legal understanding is paradigmatic with respect to the way in which practical reason operates in general. The one who applies the law must not simply know the letter of the statute and subsume the case under its heading, but must mediate the concrete situation that cries out for justice, which is exceptional and singular, with the universality crystallized in the text of the law. That is, applying the law implies a form of dialogue between the concrete case and the letter of the law that, while not free (in which case we would be facing capricious decisionism), responds to rules that our finite human reason cannot fully determine⁶. The seriousness and fragility of the cited case, a woman managing to escape after being a victim of rape, makes it rational from a practical

viewpoint not to apply the fine. This is not, properly speaking, a failure of the statute. It simply happens that, due to its own finite nature, it cannot cover all cases and therefore stipulates regarding what happens in general, that is, most of the time. In that sense, it is not that the law loses its validity by not being applied in exceptional cases. On the contrary, *phronesis* comes to perfect the law, as it comes to fill the void (or *openness*) that the finitude and precariousness of the legal text reveal in the face of exceptional cases.

Therefore, the issue confronted by practical reason centers on its engagement with contingency—the domain of what may or may not be. This engagement encompasses the ever-shifting landscape of the world and the spectrum of human actions within this contingent environment, with an overarching objective to refine and enhance such actions. This engagement, however, poses a notable challenge. If certain actions are discernibly superior to others in the context of contingency, this implies a certain level of non-contingency. There exists a normative framework guiding practical reason in its interaction with contingency, enabling us to evaluate actions as good or bad. This framework suggests the potential to develop mechanisms aimed at steering humanity towards beneficial outcomes in these realms. Although practical reason lacks the universal scope characteristic of theoretical reason, it embodies a form of particular universality. Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his interpretation of Aristotle, elucidates this notion by saying that

“he [Aristotle] describes how various perceptions unite to form the unity of experience when many individual perceptions are retained. What sort of unity is this? Clearly, it is the unity of a universal. But the universality of experience is not yet the universality of science. Rather, according to Aristotle, it occupies a remarkably indeterminate intermediate position between the many individual perceptions and the true universality of the concept” (Gadamer 2013, p. 359).

Practical wisdom (*phronesis*), therefore, pertains ultimately to the rationality that operates within the realm of the contingent. It faces the intricate task of seeking universality amidst the exceptional cases presented by the facticity of individual experiences.

In synthesis, practical rationality, whose epitome is *phronesis*, is thus characterized by an apparent oxymoron: it is an openness that adheres to rules. There are rules because it is not a matter of acting freely based on mere opinions or arbitrary ideas (it does not seem justifiable that sanctioning the woman in the given example would be considered rational under a legalistic argument). At the same time, however, openness is necessary, for establishing fixed and precise rules for righteous action in a world where necessity is rare and contingency seems to be the norm⁷ is something exceeds our finite capacities. In the next section, we will justify that if the practical dimension of rationality as portrayed by Aristotle (and Gadamer), which encompasses an openness that does not devolve into mere romantic emotivism, is considered, then it is feasible to view mysticism in terms of rationality. For this exercise, we will concentrate, as pointed out in the Introduction, on the works of Evelyn Underhill.

4. Mystic Rationality: Making Sense of an [Apparent] Oxymoron

Evelyn Underhill, a 20th century scholar of mysticism, makes an interesting comment in her work “Mysticism”. She notes that mystical narratives evidently embody intense emotions—consider, for instance, Meister Eckhart’s description of total surrender, where a person’s attitude embodies a profound acceptance and trust in the divine to the point that he claims that “if his friend dies «In God’s Name!» If he loses an eye «In God’s name!»” (Eckhart 2009, p. 97). However, she argues, mysticism is not mere emotivism, in which case the mystic would be a slave or addict to an intense rush of pathological nature. For the spiritual aspirant, emotion is not a reliable guide, yet it can be a tremendous (albeit somewhat arrogant) servant when harnessed by will and reason. In her words, “at bottom, then, we shall find in emotion the power which drives the mental machinery; a power as strong as steam, though as evanescent unless it be put to work” (Underhill 1911, p. 56). That is to say, she argues that mysticism encompasses not only emotion but also reason. In what follows, it will be argued that in mysticism as portrayed by Underhill, we find elements

that would allow us to classify this tradition as rational from a practical standpoint. In particular, we will see that the English scholar recognizes a progressive order that must be followed by those who intend to pursue the mystical path (and in that sense, there would be rules), but at the same time, she emphasizes the various ways in which this order can manifest in concrete life. In other words, Underhill implies that in mysticism we find an ordered openness—an oxymoron that, as we have seen, characterizes practical rationality.

Underhill defines mysticism as “*the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment*” (Underhill 1914, p. 3). To ensure that the concept of union does not remain as what Kant would call paralogistic pseudo-rationalism, Underhill provides a concrete explanation of what this concept aims to convey. Although extensive, it is worth replicating her words:

“the word «union» represents not so much a rare and unimaginable operation, as something which he is doing, in a vague, imperfect fashion, at every moment of his conscious life; and doing with intensity and thoroughness in all the more valid moments of that life. We know a thing only by uniting with it; by assimilating it; by an interpenetration of it and ourselves. It gives itself to us, just in so far as we give ourselves to it; and it is because our outflow towards things is usually so perfunctory and so languid, that our comprehension of things is so perfunctory and languid too”. (Underhill 1914, p. 4)

In other words, the way human understanding relates to the world is through union. That which is *out there* is incorporated into our soul in the form of a concept—an image or ideal representation of reality. We then assimilate this representation and become one with it. Thus, the concept of union with the world does not refer to an experience exclusively attained by a few exceptional individuals throughout history, but rather to the regular operation of human understanding. To understand the world is, in a sense, to unite with it—although not all unions with the world are mystical.

Now, the fact that human understanding typically operates through union does not mean that it always functions optimally. In other words, it is possible that the conceptual image we form of what we perceive in the world might not be an adequate representation of the perceived reality. In fact, Underhill tells us that the norm is for humans to unite not with reality itself, but with a distorted portrayal of it. This occurs mainly for two reasons: first, the symbolic nature of human understanding inevitably means that reason is incapable of fully grasping reality. Put simply, the word is not the thing, meaning the former can never completely encompass the latter. Second, even considering that the human mind is incapable of fully comprehending the reality it perceives, the conceptual image we capture is far from being the most pristine version of it, as we project prejudices—preconceived concepts in our minds priori to the experience—onto what we perceive. The result is that “the coloured scene at which you look so trustfully owes, in fact, much of its character to the activities of cogitation, the seer”⁸.

It is at this point that the significance of the *unio mystica* becomes clear, at least in Underhill’s thought—though we believe this to be a common characteristic of all authentic mysticisms. It refers, at least in part, to the conditions of possibility for human understanding⁹. That is, one who mystically unites with the world does so without projecting content from their mind onto the world. Those who progress on this spiritual path gradually disarticulate (surrendering) the pre-existing contents of their mind—a priori, prior to experience¹⁰—thereby expanding the horizon from which reality is grasped, gradually giving rise to “larger and larger existences, more and more complete realities [...] learning to know them, to share their very being, through the magic of disinterested love” (Underhill 1914, pp. 138–39). The *mystic way*, as Underhill calls the series of stages of surrender that the spiritual aspirant should follow, is essentially an attempt to provide a framework that the average human being can understand to embark on this epic journey—one that begins, Underhill tells us, with the transition from an unsophisticated Self, which uncritically accepts the mental image as reality itself, to a sophisticated self, aware of its own ignorance regarding the content projected through understanding and skeptical of the images perceived in the

mind (Underhill 1911, p. 6), and ends with what she calls the *mystical life*, a life in which one becomes independent from the slavery of the senses and the mind's projections (or preconceived ideas) and becomes the captain of one's soul (Underhill 1914, pp. 146–47).

This discussion allows us to begin to understand how mysticism can be considered rational from a practical standpoint. As previously explained, all rationality ultimately refers to universal behavioral norms that are communicable and enforceable among individuals. In the realm of practical existence, however, we face a dilemma: while we recognize that human behavior is rule-governed, the world's incommensurability and the variety of situations we encounter make it impossible to clearly and precisely define these norms. Underhill's mysticism—and we believe this to be true for all genuine mysticism—confronts a similar dilemma. Like practical wisdom (*phronesis*), it proposes a guiding yet inherently incomplete framework. Specifically, Underhill's mysticism operates within the normative dimension of practical rationality, aiming for a clear goal: to achieve an experience of pure perception, free from individual projection onto the world¹¹. There are steps or facets, which form what Underhill calls the *mystic way*¹², for individuals to approach this perspective. However, the guidelines and stages of the path—preparation, purgation, attainment, and mystical life¹³—are not definitive. They are fuzzy and adaptable, offering a general outline of the spiritual aspirant's challenges without being exhaustive. Such flexibility even allows for the legitimacy of direct paths—examples include Huang Po's (Huang Po 2007) Zen Buddhism or Ramana Maharshi's (Maharshi 2018) self-enquiry—that while valid in themselves, do not undermine the authority of progressive mystical paths as the ones proposed by Underhill (Underhill 1911), Teresa of Jesus (de Jesús 1902), Climacus (Climacus 1982), or Hawkins (Hawkins 2015) among others. Thus, while mysticism responds to some kind of logic and order (is not an open-ended solipsism where “anything goes”), this order is characterized by its openness; it is flexible and ultimately shaped by the individual's unique journey and the circumstances they encounter. In essence, the mystic, embodying practical wisdom (*phronesis*), recognizes a rational order towards goodness and the possibility of disorder leading to evil, yet acknowledges the limits of fully understanding and articulating this order through concepts.

As in all practical knowledge, an example will serve to clarify what we are trying to convey. Think of teaching, a discipline that is eminently practical. Indeed, being a good teacher requires the use of pedagogical techniques. This includes having a well-structured course curriculum that breaks down content into units, clearly outlines expected learning outcomes for each unit, and a syllabus that effectively organizes the semester, all complemented by accessible materials for students. However, an end-of-semester survey querying students about whether the teacher fulfilled these requirements and whether they consider the teacher to be a good educator or would recommend them to others might yield surprising results. Even if the teacher scores highly on all technical aspects, the response to this overarching question could still be negative—a phenomenon that often perplexes methodologists and curriculum designers. This discrepancy underscores the difference between technical proficiency and perceived teaching effectiveness. Why might this occur? Because teaching, as a form of practical knowledge, is an experience that transcends mere technical discipline. There is an indescribable quality, a *je ne sais quoi*, that distinguishes a truly good teacher. While technical skill is essential, the most effective teachers also possess an ineffable dimension that enlivens their classes—and that is why it is so difficult to find good teachers.

The same occurs along the *mystic way*. Even when there is a spiritual aspirant who strictly follows all the rules and exercises that a particular path demands, they might not reach enlightenment or mystical union. The Zen Buddhism of Huang Po, for example, is aware of this and seeks to correct the idea that enlightenment is a reward obtained after hard and straight spiritual discipline and insists, to the despair of students, that “there is absolutely nothing which can be attained” (Huang Po 2007, p. 125). That is, while spiritual exercises can be beneficial in certain contexts, their effectiveness is limited if they are not recognized as instrumental in achieving a stable foundation—one that should be

independent of mundane practices and deeply connected to the ineffable and extraordinary aspects of human existence¹⁴.

In summary, the exemplary way allows us to see that teaching and the *mystic way* are part of practical rationality. There are rules, as a teacher who talks about whatever he wants in class without any order is a bad teacher, and someone who indulges their whims and subjectivity under the guise of following a spiritual path is not a good spiritual aspirant. But since these rules are oriented towards generating the conditions under which an experience is possible (the *unio mystica*), they are flexible, dependent on context, and, for the same reason, resist being fully described. The pursuit in this context is for the universality of the concrete, a concept inherently dynamic and ever evolving, leading to what can be described as “fuzzy universality”, a term that aptly captures the fluid and indeterminate nature of universality as it applies to the concrete.

Finally, although it would warrant a separate study—an interesting, although ambitious, approach to this could result from using Aristotle (Aristotle 1991d), Underhill (Underhill 1976), Jung (Jung 1980a), Tolkien¹⁵ and Campbell (Campbell 2008)—we believe that the fuzzy and ineffable nature of mysticism’s practical rationality is one of the reasons why Underhill seeks to express its essence not only academically, but also through literature in her novels *The Grey World* (Underhill 1904), *The Lost Word* (Underhill 1907) and *The Column of Dust* (Underhill 1909). In a way, Underhill, in line with what Aristotle says about Aeschylus and Sophocles, provides life models for emulation¹⁶ (*mimesis*¹⁷). This approach is chosen precisely due to the limitations of human reason in defining the rules of practical rationality, in which we have argued mysticism participates. Aristotle tells us that, “regarding practical wisdom [*phronesis*], we shall get at the truth by considering who are the persons we credit with it” (Aristotle 1991b, VI, 1140a24–1140b19). Therefore, examples, rather than theoretical explanations, are more effective in capturing and later emulating the essence of practical wisdom. The moral dimension of art, thus, presents archetypes that enable us to grasp these open and adaptable norms of practical reason in a more open and flexible manner.

In synthesis, while the inability to formulate clear, precise, universal, and necessary rules that would allow any individual to progress towards mystical life precludes mysticism from being considered rational from a scientific theoretical perspective, recognizing the paradoxical oxymoron of an open and flexible order in the path of spiritual advancement allows us to assert its rationality from a practical standpoint. Additionally, mysticism’s confrontation with the unique challenge of practical reason—specifically, the difficulty in conveying practical wisdom (*phronesis*) due to the ambiguity of its rules and the necessity of using exemplary methods (like narratives about the lives of mystics) and art—further reinforces the notion that authentic mysticism is rational from a practical standpoint.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this work was to justify that mysticism, as Evelyn Underhill portrays it, is rational from the perspective of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), as proposed by Aristotle (and further developed by Gadamer). To lend plausibility to our hypothesis, we began by arguing, following Kant, that from a scientific viewpoint, that is, reducing rationality only to that which can produce universal and necessary knowledge, mysticism cannot be considered rational. The diversity of paths leading to a mystical experience and the inability of language to articulate precise rules—both themes emphasized by Underhill as inherent to mysticism—lead to the dismissal of its rationality.

However, we then saw, this time supported by Aristotle, that if we expand the concept of rationality to include those dimensions of existence that do not unfold in a typical or regular manner—what Aristotle calls practical reason—then mysticism is indeed rational. We observe in it the oxymoron typical of practical knowledge, namely, a rule-guided openness. There are rules, and in that sense, Underhill lays out stages on the *mystic way*. However, it should not be understood that these rules exhaust mysticism or have the ability to always generate the same result (as in the scientific method). In simpler terms, practical reason skillfully navigates the concept that “sometimes yes and sometimes no”, without

succumbing to arbitrary subjectivism. This is uncomfortable for the mind seeking clear and stable rules. Mysticism echoes this sentiment. Given that, ultimately, the spiritual paths often categorized as mystical aim to achieve an experience of pure perception, it follows that any method or practice that effectively brings an individual closer to this experience is valid. However, this does not imply an absence of normativity within these paths. Rather, it indicates a recognition that this normativity is open and flexible, uniquely shaped by the individual's specific characteristics and the context they encounter.

In mysticism, therefore, it is coherent to sometimes say yes, for instance, to spiritual practices, retreats, and asceticism, while other times rejecting them. That is, the way in which the rule or principle is articulated depends on the *context*. Here lies the core of practical knowledge. It thematizes the context in which content emerges in a serious and rigorous manner. Gadamer, when speaking about the interpretation of texts, tells us regarding context that: "what is true of the written sources, that every sentence in them can be understood only on the basis of its context, is also true of their content. Its meaning is not fixed. The context of world history—in which appears the true meaning of the individual objects, large or small, of historical research—is itself a whole, in terms of which the meaning of every particular is to be fully understood, and which in turn can be fully understood only in terms of these particulars" (Gadamer 2013, p. 184). That is, the interpretation of texts, which according to Gadamer is paradigmatic of the manner in which practical reason operates, must take into account the context in which the text is to be applied for the meaning of it to fully emerge.

In that sense, mysticism is fundamentally practical-rational, as it acknowledges that context is an untamable beast, whose mode of appearance we cannot foresee, but also cannot ignore (just like death). Clearly, it would be easier to deny the validity of context and stick with what the human mind can explain—adopt the paradigm of science and totalize it, making it the only legitimate instrument to produce true knowledge in all dimensions of existence¹⁸. But mysticism opts for the more difficult choice: to include context in a serious and rigorous way. In this sense, it is paradigmatically rational because, instead of ignoring this dimension of existence, it takes it as a datum of experience that requires special attention if one wants to understand this world. Furthermore, it must be considered that practical reason in general, and mysticism in particular, possess the virtue of not undermining exact science, as it recognizes that the context in which the hard sciences unfold, namely, one in which existence unfolds in a typical or regular manner, rigid and causal categories are useful. That is, it does not seek to de-scientize the world, but rather to acknowledge and reinforce its validity, but only in the context of linearity¹⁹. Authentic mysticism, therefore, does not position itself as opposed to science, but merely against scientism—a totalization of the scientific paradigm to all dimensions of existence.

Succinctly put, there are rules that govern practical reason. However, due to the inherent dynamism and incommensurability of practical reality, we cannot fully grasp and formulate them. The same applies to spiritual progress, which mysticism aims to guide us toward. It follows logics that are unique to it but cannot be exhaustively described or prescribed due to the mysterious unfathomability of the human soul. Therefore, we must be content with partial descriptions, based on exemplary pathways or conveyed through myths, parables, or art in general. Yet, this practical normativity, which we argue mysticism partakes in, *is real*, and becoming aware of it is a condition of possibility for a fulfilling human life.

It is also worth mentioning, although this topic exceeds the scope of the current work, that Underhill's reflections on mysticism as an art of union with reality prompt a question about the nature of that which humans unite with through understanding. In other words, it leads to the metaphysical question: what is reality? This question, deserving extensive volumes for its development, finds a fascinating approach in mysticism in general, and particularly in Underhill's reflections. Underhill suggests that the goal of spiritual life is to achieve harmony between the knowing subject and the known world, so that, in the light of this harmony, the essence of reality emerges. This essence, which Underhill seems

to indicate is relational—not a standalone thing existing independently of the subject—is nothing other than Being itself. In this sense, the *mystic way* aims to refine the subject's perceptual disposition, initially prompting them to fix their attention on a mundane object so they can perceive it as participating in Being, and then enabling them to focus on Being as the substrate for all existence (Underhill 1914, p. 115). Underhill states:

“It is in man's moments of contact with this [Being], when he penetrates beyond all images, however lovely, however significant, to that ineffable awareness which the mystics call ‘Naked Contemplation’—since it is stripped of all the clothing with which reason and imagination drape and disguise both our devils and our gods that the hunger and thirst of the heart is satisfied, and we receive indeed an assurance of ultimate Reality. This assurance is not the cool conclusion of a successful argument. It is rather the seizing at last of Something which we have ever felt near us and enticing us: the unspeakably simple because completely inclusive solution of all the puzzles of life” (Underhill 1914, pp. 109–10).

Therefore, it is the harmony between the subject and reality that allows the individual to become aware of the essence of the latter (reality), which is none other than Being itself. This experience, the goal of all authentic mysticism, is simultaneously alien and familiar. It is alien because it resists conceptual articulation, a challenge to the human mind. Yet, it is familiar because Being is perceived not as something distinct from ourselves, but as participating in and giving rise and reason to our own existence. It is akin to returning home after a long journey: the destination (home) differs from the path, but it is a known place that reveals itself as being intrinsically part of one's own existential constitution. The mystical experience is, therefore, like a return to the house of being (Heidegger 1993, p. 263).

This reinforces the idea that while philosophical reflection on mysticism is valuable and enriching, ultimately, union with reality is an experience of Being. Being, as partaking in all that exists, allows the individual to perceive (or perhaps “intuit” might be a better term) a complete and total harmony between the subject and the universe. In summary, although the philosophical exploration of mysticism extends beyond the limits of this work, it is clear that the ultimate goal of mysticism, as seen through the lens of practical reason, is to facilitate a profound and authentic experience of Being. This experience transcends mere subjective spiritualism, grounding the mystical journey in a universal (yet particular) and harmonious connection with all of existence.

Before we conclude, there are two themes we consider important to mention. First, we insist that from the standpoint of Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy, mysticism would not be considered rational. However, we see a possibility—albeit one that requires further investigation—of perceiving a certain degree of rationality in mysticism when approached from the perspective of Kant's third critique. A deeper exploration of Kantian thought, particularly regarding the *reflective* use of the faculty of judgment²⁰, suggests that mysticism might possess a form of rationality. This is not a rationality that leads to knowledge in the strictest sense, but rather one that postulates a universal rule or concept towards which reason is oriented (*as if* it were real²¹), yet never fully attains as knowledge.

Secondly, this work primarily focused on what Underhill describes as the *mystic way*—the progressive path that the spiritual aspirant follows to purge or purify their perception and way of being in the world (Underhill 1911, pp. 112–13). However, we did not thoroughly address the *mystic field of perception* (the mystical experience per se), which refers to

“The revelation under which the contemplative becomes aware of the Absolute. This includes a consideration of the so-called doctrines of mysticism: the attempts of the articulate mystic to sketch for us the world he has glimpsed, in language only adequate for the world in which the rest of us dwell. Here, arises the challenging question of symbolism and symbolic theology, a point where many promising expositions of mysticism have foundered” (Underhill 1911, pp. 112–13)

While this subject deserves a lifetime of dedicated study, it is important for this work to acknowledge that Underhill notes that as one progresses further on the *mystic way* towards a perception purged of distortions, rational categories become less effective in

explaining what is perceived. Therefore, to truly grasp the mystical field of perception, an even greater level of openness is necessary. This entails openness not only to the reality that emerges once pure perception is attained but also to the method of communicating this experience. Here, the emphasis transitions from conveying specific content to transmitting the context from which the content emerges. This is why, at this point in mysticism, there is an abundance of stories, myths, poems, and artistic representations. This is because, as Gadamer aptly articulates, aesthetics is not merely a matter of personal preference; rather, it serves as a profound method for unveiling the truths embedded within context (Gadamer 2013, pp. 33–34)—thus holding value for practical rationality. Recognizing the limitations of language (and, therefore, of philosophy) in fully capturing this mystic experience, we find that sometimes art and poetry speak more profoundly than prose. In this spirit, we conclude with a poem inspired by Meister Eckhart, which recites:

“Enough with words, now.
This is more than enough.
Shhhhhh.
Enough. Go.” (Sweeney and Burrows 2017, p. 205)

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Notes

- ¹ Hawkins argues that when the suffix ‘ism’ is added to a concept, it refers to a closure of reality in light of a narrow and inflexible paradigm in which the adherent is convinced that the description that the ‘ism’ provides of reality is a faithful correlate of the truth of said reality. Regarding this topic, he comments that “each person perceives, experiences, and interprets the world and its events in accord with their own predominant level of consciousness. This is further reinforced by the mind’s proclivity to explanation via mentalization and rationalized interpretation of perceived data. Thus, each level tends to be self-reinforcing by the circuitry of reification. This process results in what is best described as “paradigm allegiance” or the presumption that one’s own personal perceived/experienced world represents ‘reality’” (Hawkins 2013, p. 59). Jung, on the other hand, points out that this is something common in philosophy. In his words, “I cannot let myself presuppose that my peculiar temperament, my own attitude to intellectual problems, is universally valid. Apparently this is an assumption in which only the philosopher may indulge, who always takes it for granted that his own disposition and attitude are universal, and will not recognize the fact, if he can avoid it, that his «persona equation» conditions his philosophy” (Jung 1980b, 75–76).
- ² Kant says that the territory of knowledge is a small island, while that of ideas is a vast and misty ocean. In his words, “This land, however, is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end” (Kant 2009, pp. A 235/236, B 294/295).
- ³ (Hawkins 2013, p. 96) In this context, Hawkins comments that the best spiritual path does not involve either science or spiritual laxity, but both. In his words, “It would therefore seem that the most beneficial combination would be that of love and faith, plus reason, in which logic and reason are instituted in the service of love for self and others as well as Divinity (as per St. Thomas Aquinas). The hallmark of this combination is seen as compassion, which takes into consideration mankind’s naïveté, limitation, and Achilles’ heel of blind ignorance of even the nature of its very own mind” (Hawkins 2013, p. 96).
- ⁴ Kant explains what he means by “law” in the following passage: “Practical *principles* are propositions that contain a general determination of the will, having under it several practical rules. They are subjective, or *maxims*, when condition is regarded by the subject as holding only for his will; but they are objective, or practical *laws*, when the condition is cognized as objective, that is, as holding for the will of every rational being” (Kant 1996, p. AA 5:19).
- ⁵ For more information on this paradigmatic case, see <https://www.elmostrador.cl/braga/2020/07/10/mujer-iba-a-denunciar-una-violacion-cuando-fue-detenida-por-carabineros-por-no-respetar-el-toque-de-queda/> (accessed on 6 December 2023).
- ⁶ (Gadamer 2013, pp. 338–39) In his words, “The work of interpretation is to concretize the law in each specific case⁸⁹—i.e., it is a work of application. The creative supplementing of the law that is involved is a task reserved to the judge, but he is subject to the

law in the same way as is every other member of the community. It is part of the idea of a rule of law that the judge's judgment does not proceed from an arbitrary and unpredictable decision, but from the just weighing up of the whole. Anyone who has immersed himself in the particular situation is capable of undertaking this just weighing-up. This is why in a state governed by law, there is legal certainty—i.e., it is in principle possible to know what the exact situation is. Every lawyer and every counsel is able, in principle, to give correct advice—i.e., he can accurately predict the judge's decision on the basis of the existing laws. Applying the law is not simply a matter of knowing the law. If one has to give a legal judgment on a particular case, of course it is necessary to know the law and all the elements that have determined it. But the only belonging under the law necessary here is that the legal order is recognized as valid for everyone and that no one is exempt from it. Hence, it is always possible to grasp the existing legal order as such—i.e., to assimilate dogmatically any past supplement to the law. Consequently there is an essential connection between legal hermeneutics and legal dogmatics, and in it hermeneutics has the more important place. For the idea of a perfect legal dogmatics, which would make every judgment a mere act of subsumption, is untenable" (Gadamer 2013, pp. 338–39).

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle says that "There are few facts of the necessary type that can form the basis of rhetorical deductions. Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which we inquire, present us with alternative possibilities. For it is about our actions that we deliberate and inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity" (Aristotle 1991d, I, 2, 1357a23–1357b23).

The complete phrase reads: "The plain man's universe is full of race-horses which are really running dogs: of conventional waves, first seen in pictures and then imagined upon the sea: of psychological situations taken from books and applied to human life: of racial peculiarities generalized from insufficient data, and then "discovered" in actuality: of theological diagrams and scientific "laws", flung upon the background of eternity as the magic lantern's image is reflected on the screen. The coloured scene at which you look so trustfully owes, in fact, much of its character to the activities of cogitation, the seer" (Underhill 1914, pp. 16–17).

This means that **mysticism has a transcendental dimension**, using Kantian terminology, since it "is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of knowing objects, insofar as this is to be possible a priori". (Kant 2009, pp. A 11, B 5).

A least according to Kant, who chooses to designate that which the subject contribute in the act of knowledge a priori "because we do not derive it immediately from experience" (Kant 2009, p. B 2).

However, this does not mean that a perception free of prejudice is divorced *from* the world. That is, someone who attains enlightenment or mystical union does not rise above the facticity of concrete existence. On the contrary, pure perception is a window towards Being (be it called I, God, Transcendence, Void, or whatever one prefers) that operates *within the world*. In other words, it is a pure-practical perception. The metaphysical reflections at the end of this work shed some light on this matter.

In her words, "a discussion of mysticism as a whole will therefore include two branches. First the life process of the mystic: the remaking of his personality; the method by which his peculiar consciousness of the Absolute is attained, and faculties which have been evolved to meet the requirements of the phenomenal, are enabled to do work on the transcendental plane. This is the «**Mystic Way**» in which the self passes through the states or stages of development which were codified by the Neo-Platonists, and after them by the mediaeval mystics, as Purgation, Illumination, and Ecstasy. Secondly, the content of the mystical field of perception, the revelation under which the contemplative becomes aware of the Absolute. This will include a consideration of the so-called doctrines of mysticism: the attempts of the articulate mystic to sketch for us the world into which he has looked, in language which is only adequate to the world in which the rest of us dwell. Here, the difficult question of symbolism, and of symbolic theology comes in: a point upon which many promising expositions of the mystics have been wrecked" (Underhill 1911, pp. 112–13).

For a more extensive analysis, see (Underhill 1914).

For a deeper analysis on this subject, see (Pérez Lasserre 2022).

Tolkien humorously comments that "Not long ago—incredibly though it may seem—I heard a clerk of Oxford declare that he «welcomed» the proximity of mass-production robot factories, and the roar of self-obstructive mechanical traffic, because it brought his university into «contact with real life». [...] The expression «real life» in this context in this context seems to fall short of academic standards. The notion that motor-cars are more «alive» than, say, centaurs or dragons is curious; that they are more «real» than, say, horses is pathetically absurd. How real, how startlingly alive is a factory chimney compared with an elm tree: poor obsolete thing, insubstantial dream of an escapist!" (Tolkien 1997, p. 149).

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle says that "epic poetry and tragedy, as also comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most fluteplaying and lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, modes of imitation" (Aristotle 1991c, pp. 1447a14–18).
(Aristotle 1991c, pp. 920a8–10).

Hawkins comments that being that the case, there is not only belief in science, but faith. In his words, "faith in science becomes 'scientism', with associated faith and blind enthusiasm" (Hawkins 2013, p. 82).

In Hawkins's words, "The linear is definable, limited, conceptual, purportedly 'objective', and locatable in time and space. In contrast, the nonlinear is nonlocal, diffuse, beyond dimensions, and is influential, subjective, and experiential. Realization and comprehension of the nonlinear spiritual realities are the province of the mystic. The spiritual realm is one of context, whereas that of the linear is content. The spiritual field is all-inclusive yet beyond delineation in terms of merely time or space" (Hawkins 2013, p. 62).

- ²⁰ In his third critique, Kant distinguishes between the determining and reflective uses of the power of judgment.
- ²¹ This aspect of Kantian philosophy is fundamental for Kant's intellectual successors. Vaihinger, for instance, constructs his entire philosophy from the Kantian 'as if' of the third critique (see Vaihinger 1935).

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Article

A Mystical Therapy: Re-Booting the Mystical

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Abstract: One of the central themes of this journal is to 're-boot' the mystical tradition for the contemporary seeker. The author, a practising psychotherapist, undertakes this in the present article by connecting three strands of thought and practice to propose a 'mystical therapy'. First, there is the Christian mystical tradition as exemplified by the medieval tradition of *theologia mystica*. Second, the practices and insights of present-day therapy and counselling arising from the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and his successors, including recent approaches from practitioners such as James Hillman and Wilfred Bion. Finally, the philosophical reflections of Freud's Viennese contemporary Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), especially in regard to *das Mystische* and the choreography of saying and showing. All three strands are blended together as the author reflects on three decades of work in the area and the possibility of 're-booting' the mystical through these means.

Keywords: Sigmund Freud; Ludwig Wittgenstein; *theologia mystica*; psychotherapy; counselling; mystical therapy

1. Introduction: What Is the Mystical?

If we are attempting a 're-booting' of the mystical the first question that arises is, of course, '*what exactly do you mean by "the mystical"?*' Having read this far in the present journal you will no doubt have a good idea of the many varying approaches and strategies that can be taken to approach this 'weasel word'. One of my interlocutors for the present paper, the Viennese linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), once wrote: 'sometimes an expression has to be taken out of the language and sent to the cleaners. Then it can be re-introduced into circulation' (Wittgenstein 1993a, 8.504).¹ Which, I would contend, is precisely the task when we engage in discourse on the 'mystical' as so importantly undertaken in the present journal. Early in my academic career I undertook a survey of the contemporary literature on the subject and came to the following conclusion which is worth quoting:

Our understanding of the contemporary academic discourse on 'the mystical' can best be seen as comprising two over-arching tendencies: that towards evaluating 'mysticism' as a quasi-ontological, cross-credal category... and a contemporary academic movement which seeks to concentrate primarily on the *form* of mystical discourse at the expense of any content, especially psychologicistic content, what we shall refer to as 'constructivist' approaches.² (Tyler 2011, p. 3)

When we survey contemporary investigations into the 'mystical' in psychotherapeutic contexts these two broad trends tend to hold; however, following Freud, the first (and prevenient) category seems to dominate (the second, following the work of Katz et al. from the 1970s onwards has taken a little longer to permeate into psychotherapeutic discussions

of the subject, see, inter alia Katz 1978, 1983, 1992). Freud himself famously referenced an *Ozeanisches Gefühl* (Oceanic feeling) in the first chapter of *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* ('Civilisation and its Discontents', translated by Strachey in Freud 1991) in response to a letter from his colleague, the Swiss man of letters Romaine Rolland objecting to the fact that Freud's earlier book *The Future of an Illusion* had failed to mention 'a particular feeling'³: 'a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of "eternity", a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, "oceanic"'. Merkur in his excellent 2010 analysis of the evolution of Freud's thought on the subject stresses the importance of Rank's 1924 *Trauma of Birth* (see Rank 1993) for introducing the idea of an origin for the 'oceanic feeling' in a pre-Oedipal, inter-uterine experience, which is more or less what Freud presents in *Das Unbehagen* as an 'explanation' for Rolland's 'particular feeling'. Yet, however satisfactory or not we find Freud's/Rank's approach to *das Mystische* it is clear that both theirs, and Rolland's, approach to the phenomenon lie within our first named category of seeing 'the mystical' as a 'quasi-ontological, cross-credal category' that underpins all religions and, indeed, is the source of all religion. In this they follow the main architects of what I called in my earlier work 'modern mysticism', writers such as Robert Vaughan (1823–1857), William James (1842–1910), William Ralph Inge (1860–1954) and Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) who formed this modern category of talk of *das Mystische*.⁴

Following Freud, as I have said, many (but not all) contemporary commentators on the subject adopt a similar stance. In so far as he defines the term Michael Eigen, for example, would see 'the mystical' as part of a feeling structure that underpins both therapeutic work and world religions, in his case Judaism and Buddhism:

I have not defined mystical feeling because I am unable to. My hope is, if I speak around it, or from it, well enough, something of value will get communicated to the reader and myself. Discussions of mystical awareness tend to undo themselves because of the paradoxical nature of the experiencing involved. (Eigen 1998, p. 31)

Merkur, again, in common with several modern commentators (see, for example, Merkur 2010) goes further to emphasise the 'ecstatic' nature of that feeling, especially if it arises in altered states of consciousness:

Mysticism may be defined as a practice of religious ecstasies (that is, of religious experiences during alternate states of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, magics, and so forth, are related to ecstasies. (Merkur 2010, p. 1)

My own approach in this article is to shift the emphasis away from these 'votaries' to something perhaps a little more 'workaday'. In this respect I have been influenced by the pioneering work of authors such as Katz and Jeffrey Kripal (see, for example, Kripal 2001) who have emphasised the 'structural' aspects of the phenomenon in contrast to its ontology of 'feeling' (Freud, interestingly enough, has the same reservations of analysis of 'feeling'/*Gefühl* in the essay mentioned earlier, see Freud 1991, pp. 252–53). However, in contrast to these later 'constructivists', I want to retain the transcendent apperception to the phenomenon as developed in my earlier books, especially Tyler (2011, 2016). To 'square the circle' between modern ontological recreations of the mystical (or even 'oceanic') 'feeling'/'ecstasy' and the (de-)constructivist innovations of recent years, I have developed arguments first presented in the philosophical work of the Austrian linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). One of the over-riding features of Wittgenstein's approach, especially as he proceeded in his discoveries, was a move away from looking for supposed transcendent entities that 'lie behind' ordinary speech and language (the 'occult' entities mentioned in *Zettel* and the *Blue and Brown Books*).⁵ The

Austrian, especially in his later work, preferenced a move towards explanation by means of observations of the ‘language games’ (*Sprachspiele*) embedded in our practices or ways of life and thus revealed by observing the pattern and nature of speech set within the way of life of the speaker. Taking my cue from him, I sought early on in my exploration of the literature to find a ‘way of life’ and ‘language game’ that corresponded to the ‘mystical form’ that we began this article with (Tyler 2009). As a Catholic Christian, I decided that rather than search for this language game in other religions (and I have no doubt similar explorations can be undertaken in other so-called ‘mystical’ religious traditions) I would concentrate on that ‘game’ unfolded within my own tradition.⁶ In this respect I was able to isolate at least three clear ‘families’ of language games in the Christian tradition. First, the early Christian uses of *mūs* or *mūstikos*, so well described in the writings of, for example, Bouyer (1981) and McGinn (1991). Second, the ‘modern mysticism’ already alluded to above, beginning roughly in the mid-nineteenth century and still, as we have seen, very much alive today. However, between these two periods I was struck by a sophisticated and well documented medieval language game/form of life which I called in my early works the tradition of ‘*theologia mystica*’/‘mystical theology’ that stretches, roughly, from the innovations of St Augustine of Hippo via St Bernard of Clairvaux and the Rhineland Mystics ending somewhere around the late 16th and early 17th centuries with the final flowering of Spanish mysticism. Initially, my studies have been preoccupied with how this *Sprachspiel* worked in practice and what, as it were, were the ‘rules’ of this discourse. However, alongside my academic theological work in the area, I had developed a private psychotherapeutic practice having trained in the aforesaid mentioned ‘Object Relations’ and transpersonal schools of the late twentieth century here in London. Initially, the two threads ran largely parallel to each other; however, as my work has progressed these past few decades, I have noticed fascinating synergies between the two approaches which form the basis of the present article.

Therefore, taking my cue from this Wittgensteinian analysis of the *theologia mystica* and following the aim of the present article, I shall concentrate here on what I believe Wittgenstein presents (like his medieval forebears) as a ‘mystical strategy’ within a specifically ‘therapeutic’ dynamic. This dynamic, I will argue, is revealed within the saying/showing dynamic set up in his early (and only published philosophical) work the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and developed, as we have seen, in his later writings. I will therefore argue here that one of the golden threads that runs through both the practitioners of the *theologia mystica* and through Wittgenstein’s *oeuvre* is not so much a concern with constructing metaphysical towers of theology (the medievals’ ‘*theologia speculativa*’) or indeed modern ‘cross-credal, ontological entities’ as with providing the practical means whereby distressed and disorientated folk may find some measure of solace and peace. Whether that is John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila writing for their novices, Meister Eckhart speaking to the lay beguines of Cologne or Ludwig Wittgenstein helping the seeker to ‘find a way out of the fly-bottle’. In this respect my concern here (and throughout most of my writing career) has been and continues to be how such writing can provide a practical and pastoral help to the seeker—as indeed how therapy can provide a means to the resolution of conflict and stress within the patient—the origins of my own ‘mystical therapy’.

2. *Theologia Mystica*: The ‘Foolish Wisdom’

To begin, then, I shall briefly elaborate on what I understand by the term *theologia mystica* and outline why I think it is important for reclaiming or ‘rebooting’ the mystical in our present times.

The tradition of ‘*theologia mystica*’ which we can say, roughly, begins in the schools of Paris, Chartres and Oxford from the twelfth/thirteenth centuries onwards, relying heavily

on interpretation and reflection on the foundational texts of Augustine and Dionysius the Areopagite, can be said to be a way of knowing (or perhaps, better, a way of unknowing), a way of theology, a way of writing and a way of praying. All four aspects will have a role to play in the subsequent influences of the tradition, especially on the material presented in the present article. Writing around 1500 the Spanish Franciscan friar Francisco de Osuna (who would later be described by Teresa of Avila as ‘her master’), drawing upon the writings of the Chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson, a century before him, advanced the position that there were in essence two types of theology—the first, what he terms the ‘*theologia speculativa*’ is essentially a theology of the intellect that sharpens a seeker’s understanding of the *logos* of the Christian life. For Osuna such a theology

Uses reasoning, argumentation, discourse and probability, as do the other sciences. It is called scholastic theology, which means it is of learned people (*letrados*) and if someone wishes to excel in it, he needs the learning tools required to excel in any science: a good mind, continual exercise, books, time, attentiveness, and a learned teacher to study under. (De Osuna 1981, p. 162)

In contrast, Osuna suggests that the ‘mystical theology’ is an ‘art of love (*arte de amor*)’ because only through love is it realised, and in it love is multiplied more than in any other art or instruction’ (De Osuna 1981, p. 164). Here, as I say, he follows Gerson for whom ‘knowledge of God is better acquired through a penitent affect than an investigative mind’ (Gerson 1958, p. 70).⁷ Speculative theology, what we would find in most modern university theology courses today, he stresses uses ‘reasoning in conformity with philosophical disciplines’ (Gerson 1958, pp. 76–77). Mystical theology, on the other hand, needs no such ‘school of the intellect’ (*scola intellectus*) for it is acquired through the ‘school of the affect’ (*scola affectus*) and the exercise of the ‘moral virtues’ that ‘dispose the soul to purgation’ (Gerson 1958, p. 77). Which is why he calls it a ‘*stulta sapientia*’, literally a ‘foolish wisdom’ (Gerson 1958, p. 73). These two ways of theology thus point us towards two ways of knowing—one ‘through the intellect’ and the other ‘through the heart’. Yet, as both Osuna and Gerson acknowledge, if we are not going to use scholastic means to acquire this ‘heart knowledge’, by what art or means is it acquired?

Much has been written of these arts, what Michael Sells in his influential book called ‘the mystical languages of unsaying’, and there is no doubt that Sells is correct in pointing towards specific methods by which the ‘heart knowledge’ of the medievals was acquired, understood and transmitted (see Sells 1994). In his analysis Sells points to three responses to the ‘unknowing’ that lies at the heart of the ‘mystical dilemma’ that anything we say of God, who transcends speech, cannot be God (hence Eckhart’s famous prayer: ‘therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God that we may gain the truth and enjoy it eternally’).⁸ First, silence. Second, adoption of the medieval (and especially Thomist) use of analogy in our speech of that which transcends speech. And third, the approach he adopts, a concentration on the ‘mystical strategy’ of the discourse whereby what is affirmed, is denied, etc. This is the method I have adopted in my own analysis hybridising Sells’ fertile approach with the thoughts of Wittgenstein contained here.

A good example of how such a mystical performative discourse ‘worked’ in practice is seen in the early reception of the mystical works of the Spanish mystic, John of the Cross (1542–1591). John himself had studied the *theologia mystica* at Salamanca University as a young man so that when he came to write his own mystical works in maturity, he naturally drew on these ancient medieval traditions (see Howells and Tyler 2024). Yet, when his works appeared the following century, one of his editors, Diego de Jesús (1570–1621), felt the need to expound to new readers of John something of the style of his ‘mystical theology’. This is important from our perspective as it reveals that ‘mystical theology’ as a particular genre with its own rules and ways of going about the search for ‘heart

knowledge' was certainly a well-established idiom by the later medieval/early modern period. As Diego writes:

This licence to use particular and out of the ordinary terms is especially true in the *mystical theology* as it treats of things very high, sacred and secret and touches on experience more than speculation—on taste (*gusto*) and divine savour (*sabor divino*) rather than knowledge (*saber*), and this in a high state of supernatural and loving union with God. Which explains the paucity of terms and phrases used in speculative thought, which in these non-material matters are surpassed by the extraordinary experience itself. (John of the Cross 1929, I.353)

Thus, the *theologia mystica* as developed in this tradition is as much an 'initiation' into a heart knowledge as a speculative analysis of thought. This reflects the original texts of Dionysius whose own text the '*Theologia Mystica*' was to give the name to the tradition.⁹ For Dionysius, theology is as much an initiation into a 'way of life' (to use a Wittgensteinian expression) as a discourse. Such an 'initiation' occurring as much through work on the emotions/*pathos*, as work on the reason/*logos*:

The traditions of the theologians are twofold, on the one hand ineffable and mystical, on the other manifest and more knowable; on the one hand symbolic and presupposing initiation, on the other philosophical and capable of proof—and the ineffable is interwoven with what can be uttered. The one persuades and contains within itself the truth of what it says, the other effects and establishes the soul with God by initiations that do not teach anything. (Epistle 9 in Dionysius the Areopagite 1950, p. 1105)¹⁰

Again, employing another Wittgensteinian theme to which we shall return shortly, mystical theology in this respect (as opposed to speculative theology) does not so much 'say' as 'show' its truth.

So, how then does this 'mystical theology' go about its work of showing? And indeed, how might the mystical therapist go about their work of developing this mystical approach in their practice? We shall move to that shortly via the insights of early analytical psychology; however, before we leave the foundational texts of the *theologia mystica*, especially Dionysius, it is important to note that very early on Dionysius (as with other great proponents of the art such as Meister Eckhart) realised that much of the work of the practice will be held in interpretation of our speech of the ineffable. As Dionysius puts it in *The Divine Names*:

We must not dare to resort to words or conceptions concerning that hidden divinity which transcends being, apart from what the sacred scriptures have divinely revealed. Since the unknowing of what is beyond being is something above and beyond speech, mind or being itself, one should ascribe to it an understanding beyond being. (Dionysius the Areopagite 1987, p. 49)

In passages such as this, transcribed into English by Luibheid in his text as 'beyond being, beyond speech,' etc., Dionysius creates his own neologic *hyper*-terms to express that moment when as we talk of the ineffable, to use Wittgenstein's terms again, 'language goes on holiday' (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 16, §38). The ineffable for Dionysius in this discourse is beyond all terms of affirmation and denial and really at the edge of speech itself. This is the *mūs/mūstikos* of the early Christian tradition to which we referred earlier. For Dionysius, as a Christian author, the ineffable signifier is provided by the Christian scriptures (Dionysius' 'divine oracles') and liturgy. As McGinn puts it:

What cannot be demonstrated by the Church is according to Dionysius made present both on the material level of symbols used by scripture and in liturgy

and also by extension, on the conceptual or intellectual level, where the negation of names and eventually the removal of both affirmation and negation bring the soul to union with the divine mystery. (McGinn 1991, p. 173)

To summarise then, if, as we have done here, we survey the style of writing within the *theologia mystica* of, for example, Dionysius, we see an attempt to hold an aporia between what cannot be ‘said’ of the ineffable through our language (‘the apophatic’) and what can be ‘shown’ through the symbolic means of, for example, liturgy and scripture (‘the cataphatic’). Essentially, a twofold process of ‘becoming and unbecoming’ (to use Eckhart’s later phrase) whereby we deconstruct what cannot be said before opening ourselves up to the possibility of what can be shown through the symbolic.¹¹

Both of these symbolic means of the tradition of *theologia mystica*, the liturgical and the scriptural, are unavailable to the contemporary therapist (unless they are working in an explicitly Christian and sacramental context). Therefore, as we proceed in our construction of a contemporary ‘mystical therapy’, we need to essay the possibility of a clinical approach that uses the means of ‘becoming and unbecoming’ without an explicitly Christian sacramental framework, and it is to this we turn next.

3. Excursus: Saying and Showing

However, before we do that it may be as well at this point to reinforce some of the Wittgensteinian perspectives already alluded to, especially the ‘saying/showing’ dynamic mentioned above. At which point another question arises—‘Why Wittgenstein?’—and what, indeed, does logical analytical philosophy have to do with medieval mystical theology? Well, as it happens, quite a lot. A number of recent commentators have tried to make sense of the final gnomic remarks that the Viennese philosopher made at the end of his only fully published philosophical work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, completed whilst on active service in World War One and a prisoner in Monte Cassino, Italy:

6.44 *Nicht wie die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern dass sie ist*

(Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but that it is.)

6.45 *Die Anschauung der Welt sub specie aeterni ist ihre Anschauung als—begrenztes—Ganzes.*

Das Gefühl der Welt als begrenztes Ganzes ist das mystische.

(The view of the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a limited whole.

The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical.)

6.522 *Es gibt allerdings Unaussprechliches. Dies zeigt sich, es ist das Mystische.*

(There are indeed things that are inexpressible. They *show themselves*. That is the mystical)

7 *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.*

(Of what we cannot speak, we must pass over in silence.)¹²

As many commentators have pointed out (see, inter alia, Badiou 2011), one of the difficulties with coming to terms with Wittgenstein’s texts is the deliberate ambiguity of his remarks. When Frank Ramsey went to Austria in 1923 to help with the English translation of the *Tractatus* he wrote back to his mother: ‘Some of his sentences are intentionally ambiguous having an ordinary meaning and a more difficult meaning which he also believes’ (Wittgenstein 1973, p. 78). Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that this style, especially in these remarks on *das Mystische* coming at the end of what purported to be a thesis on logical form, should, literally, mystify his earliest commentators, not least Bertrand Russell.¹³ Although his former mentor and friend paid fulsome praise to the work in his preface (‘a book no

serious philosopher can afford to neglect') he did not accept the conclusions, especially the references to 'the mystical'. Consequent commentary has often sided with Russell (and most members of the Vienna Circle) in finding the 'mystical remarks' a sideshow or hindrance to the main action of the *Tractatus* which is seen as primarily concerned with logical form or the nature of meaning.¹⁴ Another approach has been to co-opt Wittgenstein's remarks into a wider search for the 'mystical' as an ontological, cross-credal category—something, again, I would argue, which does not seem to be Wittgenstein's purpose here.¹⁵ Rather, as I argued earlier, I interpret the Austrian as presenting a view of the 'mystical' that neither concerns itself with supposedly 'cross-credal, ontological entities' nor with the medieval theologians' desire to seek a transcendental perspective. Rather, I am concentrating in the present article on what I understand the Austrian presents (like his medieval forebears) as a 'mystical strategy' within a specifically 'therapeutic' dynamic.¹⁶ Which is the approach the philosopher struggles to introduce into his later writings (none of which were published in his lifetime), most especially in the posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations*. As Wittgenstein counsels, and experience has shown me, this is not achieved through clever interpretations and interventions but rather by 'surveying the foundations of possible buildings':

Clarity, perspicuity (*Durchsichtigkeit*) are an end in themselves. I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as having a clear view (*durchsichtig*) before me of the foundations of possible buildings. My goal, then, is different from the scientist and so my think-way is to be distinguished. (Wittgenstein 1993a, 8.459)¹⁷

Thus, this peculiar art of standing in relation to the other—whereby we observe the foundations of thought without building new metaphysical entities—is for me the essence of what I would call this 'mystical therapy' having its roots both in the medieval mystical tradition and Wittgenstein's (post-) modern approach to our personal interactions—especially in a therapeutic setting. Like his philosophy, therapy: 'simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us' (*Philosophical Investigations* §126 in Wittgenstein 2001, p. 43).¹⁸

We are therefore describing a post-Enlightenment (and indeed pre-Enlightenment) way of knowing/unknowing (therapeutic and mystical discourses) that requires a more interactive and immediate medium or frame of reference than thinking or conceptual analysis alone provides (hence, as we shall shortly see, the importance of the symbolic use of, for example, symptoms and dreams, in tandem to the 'unknowing' gaze of the apophatic).

Therefore, for both Wittgenstein and the mystical writers discussed above *change* and *transformation* are paramount. They entice us, excite us, goad and puzzle us. *They are not meant to leave us alone*. They pose us problems (Wittgenstein's thought games, the mystical writers' word pictures and challenges) which cannot be ignored. If we play their games with them, they re-orientate our perceptions of reality, ourselves and our place in the world: for they are primarily *performative discourses* that 'show' rather than 'say'. In Genova's words they are 'elucidations':

Elucidations are in a class of their own, not quite poem, aphorism or logical equation, they resist categorization... They instruct by example, by showing rather than saying. (Genova 1995, p. 108)

As Wittgenstein states in his preface to the *Tractatus*, there is what is presented on the written page and what is unwritten, and often 'this second part is the important one' (Wittgenstein 1967b, p. 143).¹⁹ Thus:

Instead of helping us 'find' something already existing but supposedly hidden behind appearances, (Wittgenstein's) methods help us grasp something new,

as yet unseen, in the emerging articulation of our speech entwined activities.
(Schotter 1996, p. 16)

To conclude this article, therefore, I will suggest ways in which these influences have evolved into my own ‘mystical therapy’, drawing on the traditions and practices developed within the therapeutic tradition since its inception by Wittgenstein’s contemporary (and his sister’s analyst) Sigmund Freud in late nineteenth century Vienna and expressed through recent work by analysts such as Wilfrid Bion and James Hillman.

4. Evenly Hovering Attention

Reflecting on the innovations brought about by his new psychological practices over the preceding decade, Freud in 1912 decided to ‘put analysis on the couch’ and discuss the *Technik* that lay behind the rapidly evolving insights of the nascent discipline (the paper was later published as *Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-analysis* in the *Standard Edition* of his collected works). According to his own anthropology the aim of the analyst was to seek ‘the fundamental rule of psycho-analysis’: for just as the patient ‘must relate everything that his self-observation can detect, and keep back all the logical and affective objections’ that occur to him, so too the analyst ‘must put himself in a position to make use of everything he is told for the purposes of interpretation and of recognizing the concealed unconscious material’. Freud’s own anthropological perspective suggested that there was the existence of an ‘unconscious’ realm to the psyche that can be accessed by means of the intuition of the analyst and patient alike. Again, without concentrating too much on Freud’s own metaphysical/anthropological constructs what interests us here are the *means* (or in Freud’s language, *das Technik*) by which this end is achieved.²⁰ For, as with our medieval practitioners of mystical theology, so Freud saw his nascent method as allowing access to levels of the self ‘beyond logical and affective objections’. So, how then were these layers accessed? This he adeptly summarises thus:

The technique, however, is a very simple one. . . It consists simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same ‘evenly hovering attention’ (*Gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*) (as I have called it) in the face of all that one hears. . .

It will be seen that the rule of giving equal notice to everything is the necessary counterpart to the demand made on the patient that he should communicate everything that occurs to him without criticism or selection. If the doctor behaves otherwise, he is throwing away most of the advantage which results from the patient’s obeying the ‘fundamental rule of psychoanalysis’. The rule for the doctor may be expressed: ‘He should withhold all conscious influences from his capacity to attend, and give himself over completely to his “unconscious memory”.’ Or, to put it purely in terms of technique: ‘He should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind’. (Freud 1958, pp. 111–12)²¹

Such an ‘evenly hovering attention’ would mirror the place of ambiguous becoming/unbecoming, saying/showing we elaborated above. Adopting a phrase of the 19th Century English poet, John Keats, we could talk of this attitude as adopting a ‘negative capability’ in pastoral interactions with others. Keats used the term to specify a key attribute of the poet which makes a person: ‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’ (Keats 1970, p. 43). This was elaborated by the systems analyst Robert French who added:

Thus, Keats’s poet is ‘related’ to the therapist, and indeed to many other ‘family members’: mother, teacher, priest, consultant, manager—anyone, perhaps, whose role involves responsibility for others. What links them is this ‘disposition of

indifference', which Pines called 'aeolian' after the aeolian harp: 'to show how the therapist's mind can be stirred by the communication of the patient, and how, unselfconsciously, the therapist finds himself responding in depth to the patient's hidden meanings'. (French 2000)

Thus, adopting this ambiguous attitude of 'unknowing' within Freud's 'lightly hovering attention' opens up new possibilities in the therapist's engagements with the people they work with. The British Object Relations analyst, Wilfred Bion, was aware of Keats's dictum and tried to put it into practice in his interactions with clients writing:

Discard your memory; discard the future tense of our desire; forget them both, both what you knew and what you want, to leave space for a new idea. (Bion 1980, p. 11)²²

He suggested the therapist must have the courage and humility to step into this 'space of unknowing' when engaging with others. Precisely, the space of the 'mystical therapy' I am advocating here: a place that requires the therapist to put aside memories, the need to control, the need to define—all the whirring chatter of the 'monkey mind'—as they 'observe the foundations of possible buildings' and allow themselves to be present for the other before them. Not least, this involves challenging the therapist's conception of themselves and their role—especially in a 'professional' context:

It is, indeed, difficult to say how to denude one's mind of preconceptions, memories and desires which make such a noise that one cannot hear the patient speak—at least not the one that we need to hear speak. In my experience the noise of my past has so many echoes and reverberations that it is difficult to know whether I am really listening to the patient or being distracted by one of these ghosts of the past. (Bion 1994, p. 65)

This, indeed, is too the 'foolish wisdom' of the medieval writers who present themselves in unknowing before the wonder—and indeed mystery—before them.

5. Mystical Therapy in Practice

Therefore, we might say that what is being advocated here is something that runs counter to much 'psychologising' as presently occurs in a clinical setting. What is being advocated is not the proliferation of possible diagnoses, syndromes or other collections of acronyms, but rather the necessity to sit with the client and enter together with them into the 'mystical unknowing' that is the encounter with the other. As Wittgenstein put it in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

The first step is the one that altogether escapes notice. We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometimes perhaps, we shall know more about them—we think. But this is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a definite concept of what it means to learn to know a process better. (the decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent). (Philosophical Investigations § 308 in Wittgenstein 2001, p. 87)

One of the aims of Wittgenstein's last writings here was to critique what he calls 'the psychological' explanation of mental phenomena. That is, an approach to psychology that attempts to 'seek causes' for mental phenomena—which we can interpret as the neurological or reductionist search for the physical causes of the change—either in the firings of neurons or some other aspect of brain structure:

Indeed, I confess, nothing seems more possible to me than that people some day will come to the definite opinion that there is no picture/representation in

either the physiological or nervous systems which corresponds to a *particular* thought, a *particular* idea or memory. (Wittgenstein 1982, p. 504, I have adjusted the translation slightly)

True to his later growing disillusion with the universalist claims of such ‘scientism’, he declares that such searching for causes is of no interest to him (Wittgenstein 1982, p. 434). For as he says himself in the *Philosophical Investigations*, by ‘giving all these examples I am not aiming at some kind of completeness, some classification of psychological concepts’ (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 175). This I think is neatly summarised by John Heaton in his *The Talking Cure* (2013) where he stresses that what we learn from the later Wittgenstein, is that:

Minds are secondary to language—we do not ‘have’ them in the same sense as we ‘have’ brains and livers. Who is this ‘we’ that possesses a mind? Is it another mind? (Heaton 2013, p. xii)

‘Of course’, he continues, ‘therapists may be stimulated by famous therapists—Freud, Jung, Lacan, Beck, etc.—but these should provoke [us] to thought, not to being a follower who identifies with their theories’ (Heaton 2013, p. 11). Therefore, as was developed by later theorists such as Lacan, the notion arises that ‘psychotherapy is a cure by means of language and other symbolic systems which act very differently from chemical cures or physical interventions’ (Heaton 2013, p. x). And *this*, I would agree, is the major insight from Wittgenstein’s ‘mystical’ use of language for psychotherapy—that therapy itself, in the words of the American transpersonal analyst, James Hillman, develops a ‘psychology that assumes a poetic basis of mind’, so that ‘any case history of that mind will have to be an imaginative expression of this poetic basis, an imaginative making, a poetic fiction disguised in the language of medical science’ (Hillman 1983, p. 4). Or, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, therapy thus lies on the boundary of ‘saying and showing’—much as ‘the mystical’ had done in those final gnomic remarks of the *Tractatus* we referred to earlier. In similar fashion the therapist waits on the boundary of ‘saying and showing’ to put into speech that which the client stumbles to articulate. As Paul Ernst (1866–1933), Wittgenstein’s contemporary, put it: ‘the problem that is *unsolvable* by means of the experience of reality is solved by an invented, rationalised story’ (Rothhaupt 1995). So, I conclude this paper as I promised by proposing a ‘mystical therapy’ that puts these theoretical considerations into practice, a practice, I may say, that I have adopted myself in my clinical work over these past three decades in London.

6. How the Mystical Therapist Goes About Their Work

In a lecture on ethics given in 1929, Wittgenstein suggested that his tendency as a philosopher had been to ‘run against the boundaries of language’ (Wittgenstein 2023, p. 63). I can think of no better description of the work of the therapist—to run against the boundaries of language. All therapists must ask themselves at some point, ‘that tricky thing—language—what does it *mean* for us?’ For therapy is, indeed, the ‘talking cure’ *par excellence* and, as Freud realised from the beginning of the practice, the work was effectively done on the boundaries of language—in Wittgenstein’s term, on the boundary between saying and showing, as he put it in the *Tractatus*:

4.121 Propositions cannot represent logical form: it is mirrored in them.

What finds its reflection in language, language cannot represent.

What expresses itself in language, we cannot express by means of language.

Propositions show the logical form of reality.

They display it.

4.1212 What can be shown, cannot be said.

In this respect, then, what is *not said* in the therapy room is as important, if not more important, than what *is said*. Hence, the therapist will pay a lot of attention to body posture, gesture, tone of voice, pauses, etc. as here, in the gap between speaking and showing, is to be found the essential ‘mystical dynamic’ the therapist is seeking. Here the therapist aids the journey of the client by assisting with the formulation of metaphors, similes and symbols as they articulate the client’s process: ‘it seems to me it is like a slow dark stream moving under ice’, ‘perhaps at the centre of this process is a cold, hard diamond’, etc. This will be aided by the metaphors and symbols of dreams, as well as poetry, music and art—all essential components of the process of image formation. As Hillman, again, put it:

Psychological faith begins in the love of images, and it flows mainly through the shapes of persons in reveries, fantasies, reflections and imaginations. . . (the ego’s) trust is in the imagination as the only uncontrovertible reality, directly presented, immediately felt. (Hillman 1975, p. 50)

For analysis goes on in the soul’s imagination and not just in the clinic:

Essential to soul-making is psychology-making, shaping concepts and images that express the needs of the soul as they emerge in each of us. (Hillman 1975, p. xviii)

We let imagination speak for itself without interpretation. From this perspective, psychology becomes a peculiar art, taking its *Weltbild* to view the ‘foundation of possible *Weltanschauungen*’: the foundations of possible buildings (Wittgenstein 1993a, 8.459).

Which, incidentally, was also how Wittgenstein saw the value of Freud’s contribution to our understanding of the mind. For Wittgenstein, Freud’s observations were not those of a pseudo-scientist but of someone who ‘changes the perspective’ of their interlocutor:

When a dream is interpreted, we might say that it is fitted into a context in which it ceases to be puzzling. In a sense the dreamer re-dreams his dream in surroundings such that *its aspect changes*. . .

In considering what a dream is, it is important to consider what happens to it, the way its aspect changes when it is brought into relation with other things remembered, for instance. (Wittgenstein 1989, pp. 45–46)

In this respect, the task of the therapist becomes one of insight into the process that embraces that of the frontier of speech and non-speech, particularly, as we have seen, in the working with images, dreams and symbols. As Hillman puts it:

Insight would no longer mean translation, no longer mean the reformulation of imaginal speech into psychological language, mainly through understanding our fantasies, interpreting our dreams. We would let the insight contained within the fantasy appear of itself, in its own ‘intrinsically intelligible’ speech. (Hillman 1972, p. 201)

In this move beyond rational categories the therapist thus becomes second cousin to the artist as they point and show the way ‘of the fly out of the fly bottle’. As Otto Rank put it in 1930: ‘the basic problem of all psychology: is it physics or metaphysics?’ (Rank 1930, p. 6). For, as he elaborated later in his American lectures that same year:

Psychology does not deal primarily with facts as science does but only with the individual’s attitude toward facts. In other words, the objects of psychology are *interpretations*—and there are as many of them as there are individuals. (Rank 1996, p. 222)

The consequence of this approach, as Wittgenstein recognised so clearly, was the ‘temptation’ to go beyond the boundary of speech/showing as we transcend the limits of human understanding. As he put it in his notes in 1931: ‘In so far as people think they can

see “the limit of human understanding” they believe of course that they can see beyond it’ (Wittgenstein 2023, p. 88).²³ Thus, the therapist must constantly be ‘on guard’ against this transgression of this boundary. Accordingly, in the therapeutic situation the primordial ‘sin’ is to stretch beyond the unknowing limits of language into the unknown of the other, as Wilfrid Bion put it:

When we are in the office with a patient, we have to dare to rest. It is difficult to see what is at all frightening about that, but it is. It is difficult to remain quiet and let the patient have a chance to say whatever he or she has to say. It is frightening for the patient—and the patient hates it. We are under constant pressure to say something, to admit that we are doctors or psychoanalysts or social workers to supply some box into which we can be put complete with a label. (Bion 1980, p. 11)

Thus, the mystical therapist has to accept the ‘unknowing’ before them rather than try and fit someone into the box they interpose on the client, or leap into this unknowing armed with explanation and interpretation. This also includes letting the symptoms speak for themselves, letting them ‘read’ us, both the client and the therapist. In this respect the mystical therapist has to resist the temptation of dualist, materialist or other ‘concrete’ notions of mind, mental health, etc. that we saw Wittgenstein rejecting earlier. We enter the symbolic world as described by medieval theologians such as Dionysius the Areopagite. In this respect the symptom itself becomes a symbol in the rich sense delineated by these medieval writers or recent writers such as Hillman.²⁴ In practical terms this will have implications in treating patients displaying negative responses to adversity. For the ‘symptom’ now becomes a ‘symbol’ rather than an adversity to battle. Writing in 1975 in *Revisioning Psychology*, James Hillman stated:

Today we have rather lost this difference that most cultures, even tribal ones, know and live in terms of. Our distinctions are Cartesian: between outer tangible reality and inner states of mind, or between body and a fuzzy conglomerate of mind, psyche and spirit. We have lost the third, middle position which earlier in our tradition and in others too, was the place of soul: a world of imagination, passion, fantasy, reflection, that is neither physical and material on the one hand, nor spiritual and abstract on the other, yet bound to them both. (Hillman 1975, pp. 67–68)

Hillman waged a life-long war against what he termed the ‘nominalism’ of medical terminology applied to psychic states (or what he would refer to as ‘soul-states’, see *inter alia*, Hillman 1983, pp. 40–43).²⁵ The choreography of labelling the ‘sickness’ of ‘depression’, ‘anxiety’, ‘paranoia’, etc. possesses, he argued, its own sickness:

The ‘real’ sickness is probably less in the style—paranoid, depressed—and more in the fixedness, the literalism with which the style is taken by the patient and the doctor. (Hillman 1983, p. 42)

Rather, he encouraged the counsellor/psychologist/therapist to work with the symptoms, to ‘befriend’ and explore them, to enable them to do the work they have to do for the person at that time in their life. What Hillman calls ‘staying with the mess’: ‘we try to follow the soul wherever it leads, trying to learn what the imagination is doing in its madness. By staying with the mess, the morbid, the fantastic, we do not abandon method itself, only its medical model. Instead, we adopt the method of the imagination’ (Hillman 1975, p. 74).

In a similar fashion, Wittgenstein’s admonition to respect the boundaries of our understanding of the ‘other’ suggests that we resist the temptation to rush into a world

dominated by the grey symptomology of pathological psychology but rather tentatively play on the richly coloured shore that unfolds before us.

In this respect, then, our words, carefully chosen, are of paramount importance in the ‘talking cure’ of mystical therapy. Wittgenstein again: ‘it is not a matter of the words one uses or what one is thinking when using them, but rather of the difference they make at various points of life. . . Practices give words their meaning’ (Wittgenstein 1977; Spring 1950, §317).

All of this work, if successfully pursued, will lead to what Wittgenstein will term in his later work ‘a change of aspect’. He developed this idea as he lived in virtual isolation at a farmhouse in Rosro near Connemara, Ireland in the late 1940s (having resigned his professorship in Cambridge and effectively withdrawn from academic life). In his final writings published as *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, he returns continually to this concept, as he mused on Jastrow’s famous ‘duck–rabbit’ diagram and how an aspect is changed in our thought and life. What fascinated him was how ‘nothing and yet everything’ is changed with the change of aspect. As he wrote in 1948 at Rosro:

What is incomprehensible is that *nothing*, and yet *everything*, has changed, after all. That is the only way to put it. Surely *this* way is wrong: It has not changed in *one* respect, but has in another. There would be nothing strange about that. But ‘Nothing has changed’ means: Although I have no right to change my report about what I saw, since I see the same things now as before—still, I am incomprehensibly compelled to report completely different things, one after the other. (Wittgenstein 1980, 2.474)

In this respect therapy, then, is about ‘seeing the world anew’—in a way nothing has changed, all that has changed is, as Rank reminds us, our *interpretation* of events. For, as Wittgenstein reminded us in the mystical remarks from the *Tractatus* which we quoted earlier: ‘not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is’ (*Tractatus* 6.44), for the ‘mystical’ frontiers are those which ‘show themselves’ for they are in themselves ‘inexpressible’. As Janik and Toulmin put it: ‘his philosophy aims at solving the problem of the nature and limits of description. His world-view expresses the belief that the sphere of what can only be *shown* must be protected from those who try to *say* it’ (Janik and Toulmin 1973, p. 195).

7. Conclusions

So, in conclusion, the present article has been an invitation to ‘reboot’, or perhaps better, ‘remove the boots’ of psychotherapeutic and counselling practice in the light of the insights of both the mystical tradition of *theologia mystica* and the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Once the boots of speculative psychology are removed, the practitioner is able to feel the sand of the littoral that lies between saying and showing under their toes. In the words of the contemporary mystical writer Thomas Moore: ‘the purpose of therapy is not to come to a rational, logical solution to a problem, but to explore it in different ways so that eventually a new perspective arises, and a solution appears out of the intense reflection’ (Moore 2017, p. 873). That perspective, I have argued here, comes into existence as the therapist and client play ‘the language game’ of mystical therapy on the warm sands that lie between saying and showing, knowing and unknowing, the rational and the mystical.

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Notes

- ¹ ‘Man muß manchmal einen Ausdruck aus der Sprache herausziehen, ihn zum Reinigen geben.—und kann ihn dann wieder in den Verkehr einführen’.
- ² For a good recent review of the debates see *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* ed. L. Nelstrop, K. Magill and B. Onishi (Nelstrop et al. 2009).
- ³ James Strachey, in his usual idiosyncratic fashion, translates Freud’s ‘*besonderes Gefühl*’ here with the English ‘peculiar feeling’ in the Standard Edition which really misrepresents the thrust of Romain’s phenomenology which expressly points to the fact that the feeling never leaves him—surely a ‘peculiar’ feeling would not come under that category (see Freud 1991, p. 251; 1982, 9.197 for the original text).
- ⁴ See, inter alia, Vaughan ([1856] 1895); Inge (1899); James (1902) and Underhill ([1910] 1993). For more on the evolution of this category see Tyler (2011).
- ⁵ ‘The idea of thinking as a process in the head, in a completely enclosed space, gives him something occult’. *Zettel* 606 in (Wittgenstein 1967a, p. 105).
- ⁶ Although happy journeys in recent years to the Indian Subcontinent has enabled me to explore some of the comparative similarities in *Sprachspiele* within the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, see for example (Tyler 2024).
- ⁷ ‘*Cognitio Dei per theologiam mysticam melius acquiritur per penitentem affectum, quam per investigantem intellectum.*’
- ⁸ Sermon ‘Blessed are the Poor in Spirit’ (Quint 32) in Eckhart (2009, p. 271).
- ⁹ As translated from the Greek into Latin by the early 12th/13th French schools mentioned above. See (Tyler 2011).
- ¹⁰ See also (Louth 1989, p. 25) where Louth also draws the parallel with Aristotle’s distinction within the Eleusian mysteries that the initiate does not *learn* (*mathein*) anything but *experiences or suffers* (*pathein*) something.
- ¹¹ See, for example, Meister Eckhart Sermon 56 in (Eckhart 2009, pp. 292–94).
- ¹² I have used here the German text in Wittgenstein (1993a), Vol. 1 and referred to the English translation in Wittgenstein (1961) which I have adapted.
- ¹³ Also, incidentally, using a cross-credal ontological view of what I called earlier ‘modern mysticism’ in his own analysis of the phenomenon.
- ¹⁴ Although, see the recent work of the Brazilian philosopher, Rodrigo Lima, who turns this standard interpretation on its head, one of whose essays is included in the present publication.
- ¹⁵ Of the other literature on Wittgenstein and ‘the mystical’ we can mention Sontag’s (2000) study. Of the writing on this subject his is the most intriguing, however the book assumes an understanding of what the author means by ‘the mystical’ or ‘the mystic’. In so far as Sontag does define his terms he seems, like so many commentators, to be preoccupied with the mystical as an ontological cross-credal entity. An approach (which many of the philosophers of religion who tackle the question of Wittgenstein and ‘the mystical’ adopt) which I have not adopted here, the arguments for which can be found in full in (Tyler 2011). See also McGuinness (2002), Barrett (1991) and Weeks (1993) for some other alternative approaches.
- ¹⁶ On recent fascinating endeavours to reintroduce the ‘therapeutic’ into Wittgensteinian interpretation see especially Cavell (1976, 1979), Crary and Read (2000) and Genova (1995).
- ¹⁷ Written as a draft foreword to *Philosophische Bemerkungen* in 1930. See also *Zettel* 464: ‘The pedigree of psychological phenomena: I strive not for exactitude but an over-view (*Übersichtlichkeit*).’ (Wittgenstein 1967a, p. 83).
- ¹⁸ c.f. *Philosophical Investigations* § 435: ‘For nothing is concealed. . . for nothing is hidden. . .’.
- ¹⁹ C.f. *The Tractatus* 4.1212: ‘What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said.’.
- ²⁰ A good overview on current philosophical assessments of Freud’s anthropology is found in (Tauber 2010).
- ²¹ I have amended the translation slightly.
- ²² Michael Eigen, mentioned earlier, writes well on Bion’s ‘mystical dimension’ in his 1998 work *The Psychoanalytic Mystic*.
- ²³ C.f. ‘My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless.’ Lecture on Ethics given in 1929 in (Wittgenstein 1993b, p. 44).
- ²⁴ Might we perhaps say that the ‘symptom’ becomes the (post)-modern equivalent of the liturgical or scriptural symbol that carried the medieval speculative theologian towards the mystical theology? So, perhaps, is the contemporary speculative psychologist led to a mystical psychology?
- ²⁵ Although, as someone with very little time for Christianity and monotheism generally, I hope the brilliant American will forgive my co-opting some of his methodology through my own ‘mystical’ lens.

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